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MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S FANTASY

Magazine
Issue #17

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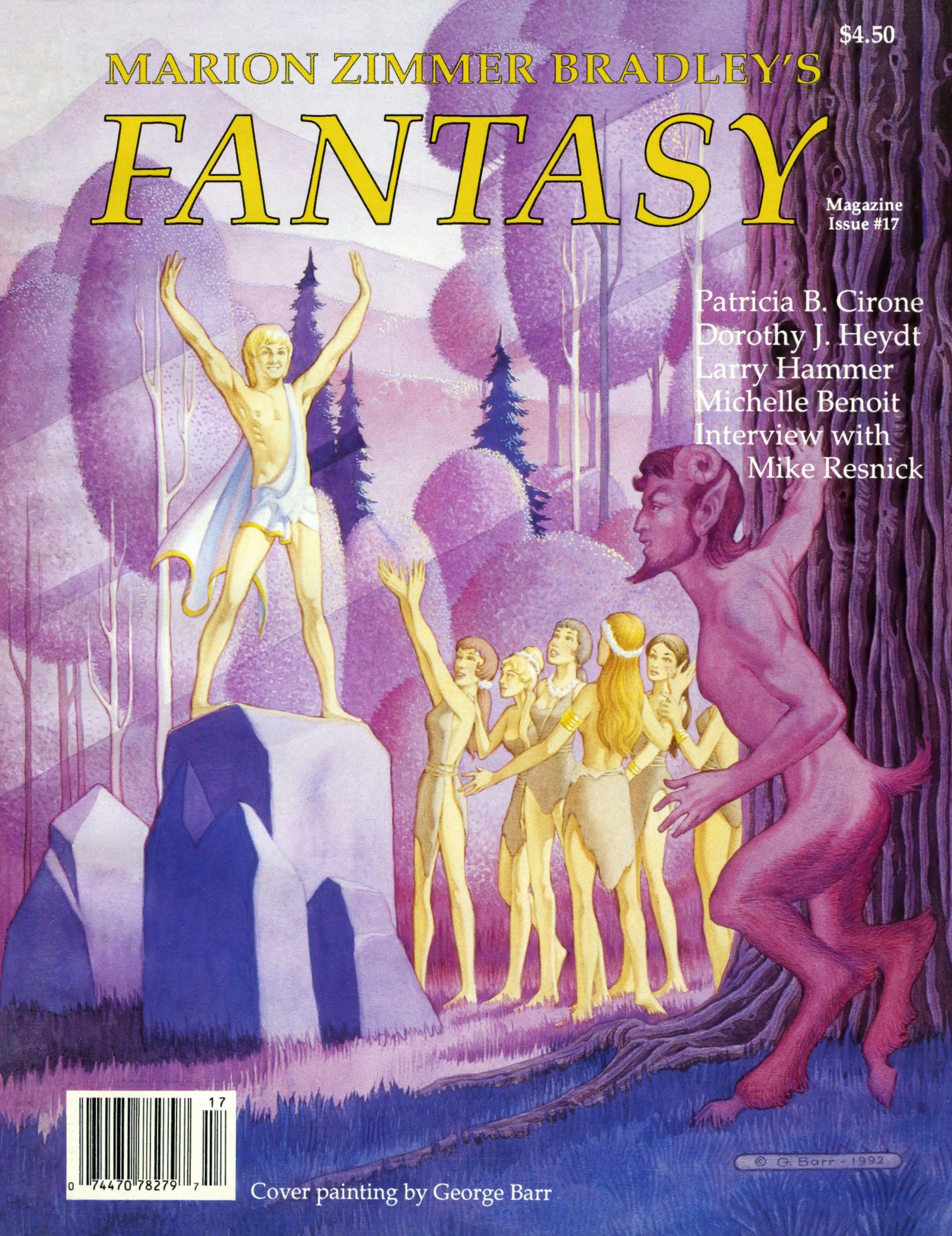

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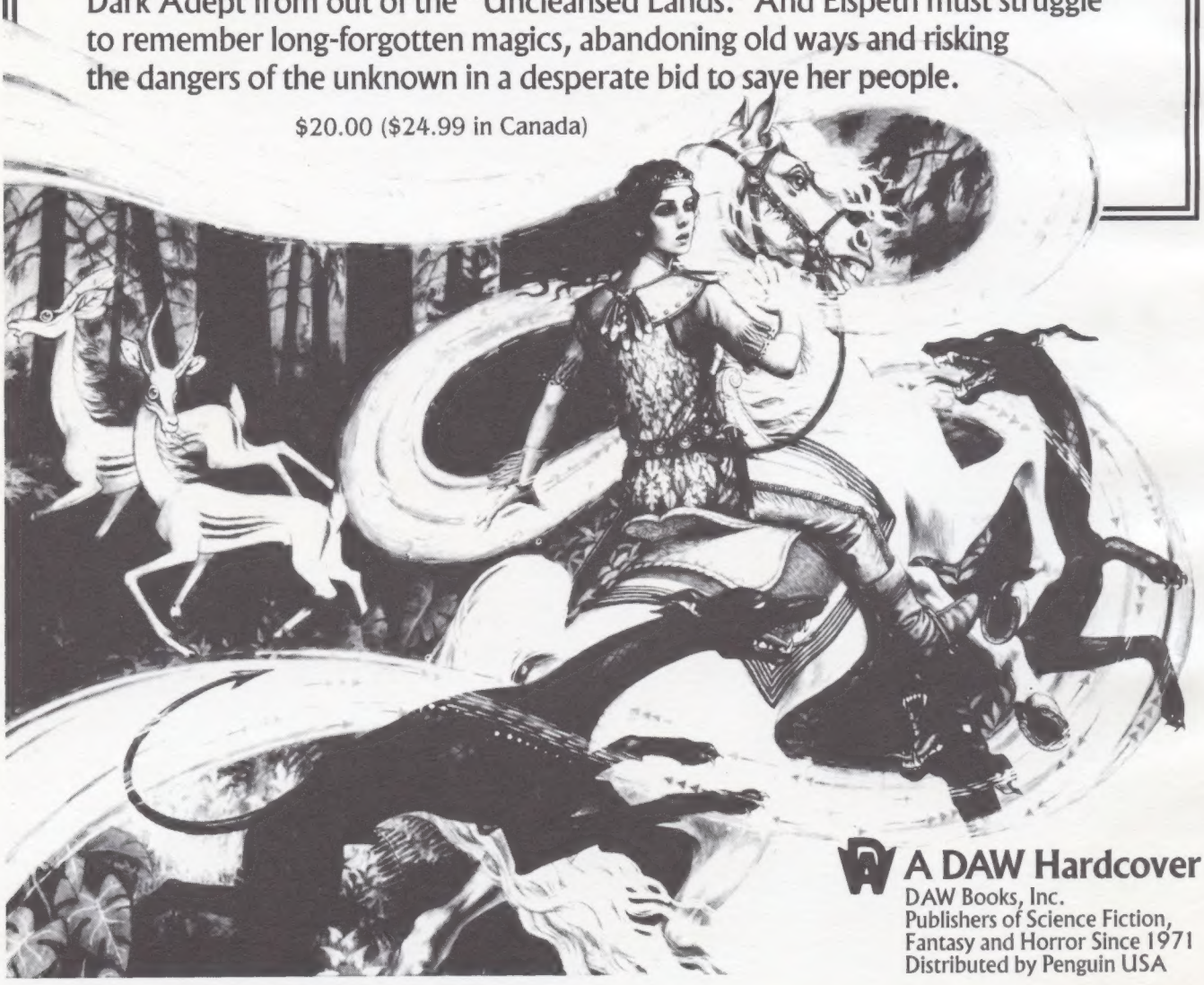

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MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S
FANTASY
Magazine

The Art of Speaking Forsoothly

The title of this editorial comes from a novel by Josephine Tey, where the heroine is commenting on the language of a bad medieval novel — which was written, she commented, "very forsoothly." After reading in a scant year more bad fantasy than most people see in a lifetime, I have come to the conclusion that all too many would-be authors know nothing about using the second person pronouns.

One example always makes me cringe — though this was written not by an author, but by a radio copywriter. Talking about the tax laws, he said, burlesquing, "You giveth; the Government taketh away."

Sure, people knew what the writer meant; but all too few people knew that it was wrong, or why it was wrong.

Do you? Honestly now, do you? Judging from the manuscripts I get, most writers don't — unless they had bookish parents or were constant readers of medieval authors, among whom I include the translators of the King James Bible. Some people, from constantly reading the work of English writers who used the second person pronouns naturally in a living language, seem to know right from wrong usage automatically; but I have reluctantly come to the conclusion that the average writer of fantasy either isn't that well-read, or just doesn't give a hang what his story sounds like. My advice to writers is to read your dialogue aloud and be unsparingly critical, as if you were listening to a drama on TV: would it play? If you're not sure, you'd do better to forget *thee* and *thou* and write simply, without trying to sound medieval. In fact, simplicity is always the better option.

When thou givest false pronouns, they taketh away from your story — if thou catchest my meaning.

Marion Zimmer Bradley

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CORRECTION:

In our previous issue, #16, we failed to print the last line of the cover story, "Never Look at a Gift Sword in the Horse's Mouth" by Jennifer Roberson.

See page 63 for details.

Pandemonium

by Sue Young Wilson

Artwork by James Balkovek

For I was terribly blasphemed, my name dishonored in Thebes.

—The Bacchae of Euripides

I was fond of human girls once. If a toothsome Greek maid got herself lost in the forest, then that was her luck and mine both. So I thought in those days, and who will blame me?

Then one day it happened that I came across a troop of girls bathing in a stream outside a village, and settled myself to watch them from cover as they splashed and called to each other, knee-deep in clear running water among mossy boulders. Presently one of them wandered away from the rest. A pretty thing, fresh faced and plump, with long black lovelocks that curled over shoulders brown with the sun, she waded upstream away and around a bend, out of sight of her friends. I liked the way she trailed her straw sun-hat and her chiton from her hand, not caring whether they got wet, or muddy even. She was a careless one. Well, she paid for it, though I let her go unhurt in the end. Her eyes as she fled were big as black olives, swimming in pools of oil; and purple bruises showed on her shoulders and thighs. I kept the hat and robe as mementos.

I slept sweetly that night, nested in a hollow among pine needles, breathing the cool pine-scented air under the turning wheel of Father Zeus's star-pocked heavens.

But next day I woke to a buzzing like that of hornets, and suddenly there were boys and men everywhere about the village outskirts. Watching from the underbrush, I saw the youths beating drums and banging sticks together, urging each other on, while the bearded men came behind with spears. Then I saw smoke black against the sky above their heads. They were bringing torches.

Now in the normal way of things, a party of mortals who had strayed too close to me was easily dealt with. I would show them my horns, and call Fear out of the trees upon them, and watch them freeze and scatter.

But I detest fire. Those who say I fear it, exaggerate, but the smoke spoils my singing voice. It puts me out of temper.

So I decided to head north for a bit from my usual dancing grounds. Lest any should think me weak-livered, I may say that I was curious in any case to pay a visit to a city up there, Taybays by name. Lately, I had heard garbled rumors of trouble there, of demons running through the forests and women going mad, and other peasant prattle. Nonsense, but interesting nonsense.

So I traveled several weeks north, sticking mostly to the highlands and going fast. I ran across no one but, once, a herd-boy with his goats, which caught my scent and deemed me a kinsman. I passed into Boetia unnoticed, and one afternoon I saw the city of Taybays set before me like a big frog on the lily pad of the plains.

I neared the city from the south. On its flat-topped hill it stood very tall, after the villages I was used to. Heat waves danced above the walls where the mud bricks threw off the afternoon sun. I circled a little ways north to come up in their shadow, choosing a spot where the wild olives clustered to within a few stones' throws of the foot of the rise.

As I threaded my way clear around the walls, light-footed in the brush, I could see that they were breached in seven places to let the country people go in and out. At each gate were mortal guards in tall helmets, leaning on six-foot spears.

I drew closer and began to hear a noise like the roaring of surf. When I listened hard, it broke apart into loud angry voices. Peering through the dust about the gates, I spotted armed men on horses.

It looked like trouble. But I was curious, and I would have thought poorly of myself for turning away from a spectacle.

I still carried the sun hat and robe which I had taken from that troublesome maiden of the stream; I had paused many times on my journey to sniff them fondly. The hat was the broad-brimmed kind worn by country men and women both. Now I jammed it down over my head to cover my horns, and girdled the robe around my waist to cover my naked and goatish parts. I left the hem of my improvised garment long enough to trail upon the ground and hide my hooves. I fancied I looked a fine, though rather short, country idiot, come to see the sights of the city in the only woven clothes he owned.

So bedecked, I made my way boldly up the hill to the largest gate, and passed through without a challenge from the sentry. Ahead of me I heard a loud harsh

voice — the same that had carried to me outside the city walls. I pressed through a thickening crowd to an open space before the temple of Zeus (the local statue was rudely carved of wood, but I recognized the Father from his rather accurately rendered frown) and squirmed between a fat woman and her basket of onions to stand in front and see what was transpiring.

Not ten feet before me, two men stood confronting each other upon a dais of new wood. There was a girl there too, small and thin, standing head down with a soldier gripping her by the arm.

The man whose face I could see was clearly none but the city's king — a dark man robed in white, with a white fillet about his brows, who stood straddle-legged with his guards behind him, power informing every inch of him. All I could see of the other, who stood with his back to me, was that he had fair hair and was more slightly-built than the king, and that his arms were dragged down behind him by shackles. The crowd was roaring as I craned my neck, but I caught the king's words when he lifted his voice up to carry.

"...so let this foreigner, this fornicator, this fancy-boy, this priest of false gods who plays on our women's pieties to make whores of them on the hillside, let him sit in the dark until he thinks better of his tricks.

"Take him away, and chain him beneath the palace."

He stepped forward and struck the other man in the face, hard, and the crowd sucked in its breath. I supposed it was not the custom of the king to strike condemned felons, but he seemed especially contemptuous of this one, whose long yellow hair and slight build did give him a girlish look. None too gently, his guards led the prisoner away.

The king turned his attention to the skinny Tayban girl. Her guard pulled her forward. She stood still before the king, not looking up. There were a few violets caught in her pale hair where it fell about her face.

"But worse than villainy is virtue corrupted," said the king. Under his rhetoric he sounded truly angry.

"This girl, a country flower whose petals no man has plucked before this, was caught by my soldiers running through the woods half-naked with that foreign whoremonger, 'priest', whatever he calls himself, him with his pretty blond curls.

"If this girl finds herself a public show now, she has only herself to blame."

The crowd tittered about me. At the king's command the soldiers parted to let an oldish man, who had been standing rigid for some while behind them, rush up on the dais and drag the girl away. I guessed that he was her father. He struck her about the head several times as they went, and I saw a withered violet drop to the ground before me.

"Poor silly slut, she'll never find herself a husband now," the fat woman next to me said with satisfaction as the girl's cries faded away into the crowd. Then, to me, "Here, you, get off my onions. They're for the market."

"Darling, you'd make a better profit if you sold your buttocks by the pound," I snarled. The woman's eyes widened; I turned and hastily shoved my way through the crowd in the opposite direction before she could raise a squawk.

I had lost my place in front, but anyway it seemed the show was over. I was little the wiser. There had been something odd about the young man in shackles, but I could not place it.

I did not want to call attention to myself by asking any questions, though, so I slipped back through the press out of the gates, and drew back a stade or two from the conturbacious city. I had climbed some way into the foothills that ringed the city when I smelled water to the east and found a sweet stream flowing at the bottom of a ravine, shaded over by tangled thorn trees. Since I had to climb up and then down to reach the place, I supposed I would be undisturbed.

I slaked my thirst and sat at ease on a rock in the shade, picking out a tune on a reed and pondering the unrest in the hearts of gods and mortals. The light was slanting low from the west when I heard an approaching noise like midnight revelers. Pipes shrilled like women, and women's voices fluted higher still.

They were coming on through the bushes; under the cracking of branches and the rattle and clash of cymbals coming steadily closer, I could hear little curses and cries as one or another snagged herself or ran a stick into her tender flesh.

In a moment they burst into view, a few yards down the watercourse — human maidens, though foreign-looking. There were seven or eight, all tricked out in little fawnskins with white tassels, pretty as you please against their brown skin. They were crying out shrilly in some tongue that was not Greek, and waving sticks tipped with what looked like pinecones and tufts of wool. Hidden behind a thornbush, I danced from one leg to another and beat my tail up and down.

But still something kept me in hiding, where as a matter of course I would have essayed a dash out and grabbed one.

I might have done so yet, but next thing a tall youth tumbled out of the undergrowth in front of me. The maidens all screamed louder at the sight of him, but not like maidens in fear. He vaulted up onto the rock that I had recently vacated and raised his hands to them, and yelled back at them. He had fair hair and a breathless, hilarious, vicious face. He looked drunk, frankly.

He raised his hands higher and gestured for silence. The women fell silent, save for their rapid breathing. Then he turned about and looked straight at the bramble that hid me.

"Come out, goatlegs. Nobody will hurt you here," he said.

So I knew that he, at least, was no mortal. Feeling like a fool, I unsnagged my pelt from the overfriendly thorns and stepped out.

He looked at my legs and smiled, seemingly to himself.

"You'd best clear out," he said. "The king hereabouts has taken offense at my conduct and my escape out of his hands, and he may send his army out after me. They might catch you in their net too. Or maybe the local ladies will, if they don't care for molesters."

I perceived then that he was the slight youth whom I had last seen standing before the king in chains. So he was a god, then. Seemingly he had managed to escape without much delay. I was surprised at his words, though, for he was a bold-looking lad and presumably had little to fear from a mortal king. And what was this about ladies?

I looked at him with my head cocked to one side, and set my right hoof on its tip meaningfully. I kept them very sharp in those days.

At that he sobered and looked me in the eyes for the first time. He sat down on his rock and gestured for me to do the same.

"Friend furry-breeches, make no mistake, I have come here in triumph; my mother was a mortal woman who lived in these parts once, or so I was told, since I never knew her. This King Pentheus will end badly for mocking at my worshippers, just as I suppose you'd be expecting." He glanced at the women crouched all about, and the planes of his face slanted upwards with amusement. "But things are changing, friend, and

danger comes unlooked-for."

What gnomic nonsense! New gods and demigods have wandered into Hellas from time to time and have settled down without much fuss, still less with this boy's self-importance. When the lad said no more, I shook my horns at him and snorted.

Unperturbed, he sat on. His face had emptied, as though he were a priest of Apollo waiting for an omen. I met his large eyes, long-lashed as a girl's but oddly blank, with dark smudges under them. Soon I started to fidget, feeling something prickle in my pelt. His women had all sat down in the dirt and were staring at us wide-eyed. It was like a bad play. Their eyes made me nervous, though.

When the youth shook his bright head in turn, I felt an odd relief.

"Old goat, forget what I say in my cups. Go and dance on your hills in peace."

Quick as winking he tossed me a parcel, though his hands had seemed empty a moment before. I caught it, heard it slosh, and found that I held a skin bottle.

The youth sprang to his feet, yelled, and jumped eight feet straight up into the air. Then he raced off. His women looked at me a moment more, then followed him with their shrill screeches. I sat again on my rock and listened to their crashing in the underbrush, until I could hear it no more.

Presently I shrugged and investigated my odd visitor's parting gift. When I had the plug out I found the skin full of wine — a glorious, glorious wine, as I made haste to discover; robust as new blood but subtle as a female's grievances. I squirted the arching stream into my mouth and laughed to feel it splatter my beard, and see it run down my chest in a scarlet river.

I sat there and felt a dreamy daze creep upon me. I watched the shadows lengthen over the fallen leaves, which carpeted the earth in a pattern of dun and green. The rock stayed warm even when the sun's chariot bent low to touch the western edge of the world. The sweet scent of the leaves beat up from the ground, and a breeze came up that bore the smell of growing things. I watched a honeybee land on the edge of a flower. Overbalanced with its load of pollen, it toppled without a sound into the heart of the blossom. My limbs felt heavy, but my head light. Almost, it seemed, I could have stretched up a hand and touched

Artwork by James Balkovek

the blue vault of Father Heaven, if my arm had not rested so softly in its cradle of greensward. I fancied I would try anyway.

I woke in darkness. The earth was a huge drum beating under my cheek. I started up; the noise throbbed on, as it does in nightmares. I was afraid. The air seemed confused with the cries of mountain cats. I could hear their yowling, strangely human in the blackness.

I stood dazedly and shook my head to clear it. The night was very black; it was my heavenly sister's time of the month, when she retired to hide the disk of her face. I was alone.

The cries came closer, and now I could hear that they came from the throats of women, not of panthers. But they raised the hair on my legs. A depth of wildness was in them that I had never heard from humankind.

I stood staring like a fool into the blackness, my heart pounding like a hammer while I smelled the breeze for hints of what was coming. Presently, between the blacker shapes of the trees, I saw flickers of what I took to be torchlight, bobbing and winking as though the torchbearers were approaching across the uneven ground.

My hooves seemed rooted to the ground, but curiousity began to wake in me again. I was not about to let a gaggle of mortal women shame me with fear — however loud their screechings.

I picked up my hat and robe, ready to don them if need be, and crept forward silently. Carefully I parted two branches to make a peephole.

The slopes that led up to my hollow by the river were dotted with torchlight, and dark shapes swarmed all over them. The shapes waved aloft sticks or staffs of some sort, and torches that flamed out long behind them like their tossing hair. The light ran before them as they ran, whooping and laughing to each other in women's voices. I saw that they were coming nearer. The torches caught their eyes like cats', flat and sudden.

A screech louder than the rest pierced the air, and I saw that one of the girls in the lead had stopped dead to point upwards. I followed her uplifted arm to a point just below where I was crouched. There was a heartbeat of silence, during which the fluid in my veins seemed to cease to flow. Then it burst back on my heart in a freezing wave, as a great beast exploded out of the underbrush not ten paces before me. Twigs and clods rained on my face even as I launched myself into a standing leap twelve feet backwards, without pause for thought. Luckily I landed short of the stream.

The clearing was full of the stink of sweat, and someone gasping in great laboring breaths like a bellows. The cries of the women had fallen away again in a confused babble. My vision cleared, and I met the staring eyes of a man. We looked at each other. I waited for him to gasp, and turn, and run.

When I saw that he was going to do none of these things, but merely gazed on, I looked harder at him. It was then I saw how oddly he was dressed. A young man of middle height and good build, he wore the shreds of a thin gown snuggled in tatters under his armpits, so that the hair on his chest showed plain. On one foot he wore a slipper whose embroidery was still visible under the caked-on dirt; the other foot was bare and bloody. Some of his strong black hair was caught up in a woman's hairnet, now set askew on his head, but the rest had tumbled down and was plastered flat to his head with sweat.

He made a noise in his throat and spat out a black clump of dirt, or blood.

"I don't know you," he said. "But come on. Come on, help me. We can fight them. There aren't that many of them."

Was he a bandit, or a rapist? The women

were from the city, and had been given first right of revenge by some local custom; doubtless their menfolk were close behind?

Seeing me unmoving, he looked at me pleadingly.

"For the love of the gods, help me. I'm the lawful king here!"

I stared at him; and it was true. He was the black-haired, rough-tempered king on the dais.

"Look," he said miserably. "If we work together we can defeat them. They're women, for gods' sake!"

"So they are," I said as jovially as I could. He seemed not to see that I was anything out of the ordinary; I thought for sure that he was mad until I realized that to mortal eyes, we stood in darkness as black as pitch.

If he were indeed the young king, Pentheus, I could not fathom why he was running about in the underbrush by night, but I was given no time to wonder about it. In the distance I heard shrill shouting, as though the women had found their quarry's trail.

"Come on, my good fellow," I said to my befuddled companion. It was high time we found a calmer lookout.

I splashed across the stream and bounded most of the way up the opposite slope before the screeches rang out at the lip of the clearing behind. The young king, struggling along just behind me, gave a low moan and stumbled. I seized him by the wrist and pulled him along, ducking between branches and leaping over fallen logs, keeping well ahead of the noise.

The woods gave good cover in the dark, and when I paused again to listen, dragging my wheezing comrade to a halt beside me, it seemed that the voices had fallen off a bit and had lost their shrill edge to confusion. I could still hear them, but they sounded farther away to both the right and the left.

We turned at an angle to follow the slope downward again, and slipped and slid until we struck a tunnel in the underbrush that reeked of fox. Some way on we slid into a shallow ravine, and I pulled my unresisting comrade into a little cave under a tangle of exposed tree-roots. I listened and heard nothing but wind in the leaves.

The fear seemed to fall away from Pentheus and me as suddenly as if we woke from nightmare, or a spell had been lifted. In the sudden ease after exertion, we laughed and shoved each other with our elbows to make room to flop on our stomachs in the dirt. Soon I could no longer keep from asking him why he was running about the forest dressed as a woman, with a screaming pack of the real thing in hot pursuit. At that he stopped laughing, and swore.

"I tell you, friend, if I never believed in a forest god of panic, I do now. Or how else to explain what happened tonight?"

He told me the story. The fair-haired god, it seemed, had led women from the Tayban countryside into the hills, to worship him in scanty garb and dubious sobriety. The king — who still seemed to think the god was a mortal man — had caught him there and taken him in chains to the city, to charge him with immoral conduct and blasphemy.

The king had thrown the stranger in prison (I did not interrupt to say I'd witnessed the scene), but somehow he had escaped and, worse yet, had enspelled more women of the city into following him. Scratched on the walls of his empty cell he had left a message taunting the king and daring him to follow and see with his own eyes what honest women were up to in the forests.

Here Pentheus paused and coughed.

"Of course I was not eager to look on our women disporting themselves in disgraceful and scandalous ways, but I thought I should rely on more than hearsay, in a delicate case touching the honor of my own subjects."

"Of course," I said reassuringly, and, under cover of the dark, winked at him.

He looked down at his gown in its tatters.

"I thought I might get away with it better if I were wearing women's clothes myself, you understand? If I were caught."

He sounded as puzzled as he did shamefaced; poor man, it had not yet sunk in with him how the god had mocked him, putting it into his mind to run around the countryside in skirts. Next thing he knew, the ladies had heard him — he must have been crashing through the woods after them like an angry boar. The next part, he muttered, he could not remember well.

"I ran then, I don't know why. It must have been sorcery. That cursed foreigner..." Now that the last echoes of the supernatural terror faded, I could see him struggling to remember how it had happened, like a nearly drowned man waking on the pier after rescue and wondering why his clothes are wet.

In truth, I could not help but like the fellow. He seemed a man's man, dress or no, while the other, though a god, had looked — indeed! — almost like a woman. When I thought about it, it seemed rather hard luck that a righteous king should be made to eat dirt for trying to stop the women of his city from rolling around in the bushes with strangers. I would never have been so hard on him myself.

And then there was the matter of how I myself had been caught up in the holy terror. Amusing to any watchers, perhaps, but less so to me.

When I thought, it seemed to me ignoble — now that there were two of us — to creep home with our tails down. Surely a pair of good lads could face down one arrogant godling who needed women to do his fighting for him. My friend stood to win back his honor, and as for me — well, if the local ladies were so generous with their virtue, here was one guest of the land who knew how to welcome hospitality.

So I said, "Well, it's a bad tale you've told me, shows what the world is coming to. And a country man like me would be a fool to meddle in it.

"Still, I wonder that a man and a king like yourself, Sir, would let some smooth-talking fancyboy trick you into running from wives and maids who ought to be at their looms, not hanging up their good names along with their clothes in the brush."

His eyes opened until they seemed to start from his head. Driving his fist against his thigh, he shouted, "If I thought I could catch them again unawares, without any tricks..." The giddiness that follows the divine madness had left him, and he was nearly weeping with pique. He gripped at his waist as though to reassure himself, and I saw for the first time that he wore a sword belted beneath his skirts. In the panic of flight he had not even thought to draw it.

It was not much work to convince him now that only bad luck had turned things against him before. If together we crept up on the women silently, we could easily overpower them. Pentheus was muttering about killing the fair stranger, but privately I thought I would be content to get the god aside and point out that although the king had made little of him, he had done the same to me, and when he had apologized peace should rule all around. We Immortals have short tempers, but gentlemen understand one another.

Pentheus was hot to start out after the women at once, but I did not fancy stumbling over some drop in the darkness,

and persuaded him to wait until daybreak. Presently we slept.

In the first gray light I donned my robe and hat before Pentheus woke, so that he should see only the sensible country gent he thought he had met. He roused at my touch and we slipped out from under our log. We were in a shallow dip of land ringed by forest, but I spotted the trail of broken branches and ploughed-up mud that we had left last night in reaching the place.

At first we backtracked. By daylight it was easy for me to follow the trail we had left in our flight. I signed to Pentheus for silence; only birdsong broke the hush as we went.

Presently there began to be, mixed with our own, the prints of bare human feet smaller than a man's. I cast back and forth until I found the place where these prints diverged from our trail, in the thick brush where we had lost our pursuers.

From there it was easy; in the heat of pursuit they had taken no care to hide their track. Here lay a streamer of ribbon, there a wand tipped with a pine-cone and tufted with wool. We followed through woods of beech and oak, passing a stream where the women had paused to drink.

The ground grew steeper under our feet, and the beeches began to give way to pines. These grew thickly, unharvested by man; the carpet of needles beneath our feet was deep and black with time. The air of morning grew colder about us.

Ahead was a dense stand of trees, giants of the forest that looked to have stood a thousand years. From somewhere beyond them I heard the song of a lark, and mixed with it, the laughter of a girl. For some reason my neck shivered. I glanced at my companion, but he looked merely eager and bright-eyed, with his teeth showing as he panted a little from the slope. He had torn the rags of his woman's gown from his shoulders and knotted them around his waist.

I motioned to him to keep low, and padded forward into the shadow of the trees. Together we began to worm our way around the massive trunks, lingering in the cover of each before seeking the next.

Now we could hear singing ahead, rising and falling like a fountain in a breeze. Past the stand of pines, the sky opened out overhead, and at the near edge of the clearing grew a fringe of long grasses, wild lavender, and spring violets. Softly we crept up behind this screen, and I parted it with my hands.

They were there, holding hands in a ring in the clearing: a score or so of women —maids, matrons, and one or two nimble crones. They had cast aside their pine-cone-tipped wands, and softly paced in the rhythms of a dance. Women who were clearly of the city went handfast with the wild foreign girls I had seen with the stranger-god before. Some still wore their city women's robes, though with veils cast aside; others were more drably clad in the garments of slaves; many wore only the skins of animals, ribbons or wreaths, and their own wild hair. Two women tapped drums of spotted skin to keep the tempo, and others sang, in cold pure voices, a hymn in a foreign tongue.

A wineskin went from hand to hand along the chain, and the women tipped their heads back to drink just like soldiers. Here and there a red trickle ran down a white arm or neck. As we watched, the dance grew faster, spinning like a dust-cloud. The faces I could see looked rapt, blind, and full of joy. Little wonder, I could not help thinking to myself; only the poorest of the women would

Artwork by James Balkovek

Artwork by James Balkovek

ever have known the freedom of the wild places before. Still, they looked pretty as a vase-painting, and I ground my teeth at the god's unsporting trick that had made them so fearsome in the blind night.

And there stood the fair stranger himself, leaning half against a dead tree. He was smiling with pleasure as his eyes followed the dance. His light skin was flushed as though with wine, and a vine-wreath was twisted in his hair. One of the girls laughed as she spun past him and tossed him a knot of spring flowers, as though he were her heart's fancy and not a god at all. Rather than blast her dead at his feet, the youth grinned back and raised his hand in a sketchy salute to her beauty.

Pentheus swore in my ear. Next moment he was on his feet. I grasped at his arm but he shook me off and strode forwards.

A girl saw him, exclaimed, and pointed. The women all stopped dead where they stood. The sounds of drum and cymbals trailed away to nothing. The young god levered himself up from his tree on his hands, and gazed at Pentheus with his brows raised. Pentheus halted and glared back at him.

I too hushed where I was and waited. It was now that a god's anger always came, and when, clothed in radiant splendor, he blasted the impious mortal dead with a single lightning bolt. I was fairly sure that I could turn his anger from Pentheus, but not so sure as to offer myself as a target.

But the young god stood still. His eyes looked empty and remote, as I had seen them once before. He smiled slightly and opened his hands, gesturing at the women, as though to say, "Well, address them, if that is what you have come for. Who am I to answer for them?" Then he leaned against his tree again and put a grass-stem between his teeth.

Pentheus looked at him, took another step forward, and then spat on the ground as though in disgust. He turned to the women, who were still standing in their ring, but all facing our way. I saw that they knew the king at once, but otherwise they looked frozen-faced. Dismay showed on some faces, the beginnings of fear on others, but not so much as I expected.

Pentheus raised his hands to show them empty.

He said, affably, "Ladies. This conduct does not become the women of Taybays: decent wives and mothers — yes, and slaves too. To have a day out, free of the menfolk, is no doubt pleasant, but for that you have the markets and washing-days at the river.

"This youth has beguiled you with false rites to foreign gods. Control yourselves; remember the reputations of your husbands, your city, and your king; return with me now. All will be forgiven."

There was silence in the glade. The strange young god, I noticed, had disappeared. Then suddenly one of the women giggled, one hand covering her mouth and the other pointing at the king. Pentheus looked down at himself and seemed for the first time to see the tattered woman's gown wrapped about his bare hairy legs.

Even from where I crouched I saw the blood that rushed up to darken his neck. He stepped forward and his hand went to his side, where his sword hung, and clenched into a fist. Forgetting myself, I stuck my whole body out from behind my tree as I craned to look. No one noticed.

The women all paused and breathed in at the sight of the half-drawn blade. Then another laughed, clear and hard this time, and trailing behind the sound came a pine-cone that flew across the glade and struck Pentheus square in the chest where he stood. He did not move. The cone hitting his flesh sounded like the thump of a rabbit's foot. His left hand came up — with his right he still held his sword half in its scabbard. He started to speak again; but a thrown staff, wreathed in its ribbons, struck the earth almost between his feet and he jumped back reflexively. A few more tossed garlands and such fell about him; it was almost pretty.

Then the voices started, soft at first.

"Pen-the-us! Pen-the-us! King Pen-the-us!"

"Send us home, King Pentheus?"

"Home to our looms, Pentheus? I slave at my loom all the day, and my husband beats me."

"Four walls are all I see all day, Pentheus, when you're walking free in the streets."

And louder.

"Where are your soldiers, Pentheus? Some of us remember them, from when they took our cities."

"A man raped me in the street, Pentheus, and your law-court said I led him on."

"You led my son to war, Pentheus, and where is he now?"

"Where's your mother, Pentheus, you're out early for a growing boy."

Pine-cones were falling all around Pentheus, kicking up a spray of needles. Then a rock hit him below the shoulder, jerking his arm back.

For one moment more he stood still, out of pure shock I think, and then he gave a wordless bellow of rage and ran forward, his sword grating from its sheath as he went. When he was halfway across the glade the women broke their line and scattered to either side. One girl, I think a Tayban slave, was slow. Pentheus grabbed her by the hair and slung her around. She grasped her scalp in both hands and skidded to her knees, crying out in pain. I saw Pentheus' arm upraised over her bent neck, and the flash of metal in the clear air.

A high yell rang out, and Pentheus staggered as another girl landed on his shoulders. As he reared up under her weight, her little foot flashed out once, twice, thrice, and kicked him in back of the knees. He staggered again; then his legs buckled and he fell, striking the earth heavily without his hands to help himself. The girls twisted up and away from him.

Another rock flew from the press of women and struck Pentheus in the brow. He gave a cry. It sounded startled, like that of a boy hurt in a game. He stumbled to his feet, with blood striping his cheeks. The women paused still, and their eyes all fixed on the blood.

I think they realized then that they had gone too far to escape punishment. It would be heavy; some of their husbands might well beat them to death, to turn the king's anger from the household.

I could have told you the instant, too, when they realized that the king was alone with them — as they thought — and had told no one where he was going.

They started forward, and I started up from behind my tree and was bounding out into the clearing before I knew it, prompted by I know not what. I raised my hands to heaven, to give the great shout that sweeps the forest with fear.

A pain like a branding iron tore through my head at the very apex of my leap. I thumped to the ground with my hands cupped over one blind and teary eye, hearing a distant squawk as I landed. Furiously I mopped wood-chips out of my eye, my battle yell forgotten, and saw a pine-cone bouncing away beside my hooves. I rolled over and sat up with my eyes still streaming water. As though in counterpoint, a man's voice bellowed with pain. Through my inadvertent tears I saw Pentheus kneeling beneath a rain of rocks, staffs, and pine-cones. It was one of the latter, misaimed, that had hit me;

the women, in their frenzy of terror and anger, had not even seen me.

He tried to break out of the circle, running at it with arms upraised before his face; the women there parted as though to make way for him, and then one stuck out her foot and he fell. His sword flew to one side. I was on my own hooves just in time to see him disappear under a wave of female limbs. I had supposed they began their attack in desperate fear, but their faces now were set in an ancient rage.

I yelled out then; and they did not hear me above their shrieking. Oh, by my kindred gods, they were terrible, like Furies, like something unnatural. I stretched out a hand to him, but he was beyond seeing as they mobbed him. I saw his face rise up out of the middle of the pile, eyes and mouth stretched wide. He fell, half stumbled to his feet, and fell again. The swarm covered him.

One last time he gained his feet and turned his face towards me. I saw that his eyes had gone. His arm came free for a moment, and he reached out blindly before him, crying like a child for its mother and weeping his dreadful crimson tears.

A woman seized him by the hair and wrenched his head around. Another struck him in the throat, swinging her whole body into the blow. He went down again; I saw his body echoing the thuds of blows. Bits of red began to fleck the air.

I called to me all the power of dread I was accustomed to master; and it was not enough. I felt strength drain from me like blood from a wound.

I backed away then, backed away an inch at a time, until the trees rose up around me and I could turn and run.

That was not too soon to miss the women beginning to fling around handfuls of what they held, like the first red roses of spring.

I had run two dozen paces when I crashed headlong into someone standing still among the trees. We both nearly went over together, but his hand on my arm steadied me. I let out a gasp like a croak. Then my eyes cleared, and I saw it was the fair stranger-god.

"You!" I cried out. "What kind of god are you?"

"Oh, of many things: of wine, and the freedom to do what one wishes."

"You did that!" I jerked my horns back towards the glade. I was weeping.

"No," he said. "They did."

He let go my arm, and I ran again. The women's voices were slow to fade behind me.

I hid in the forest and lived, as you may assume.

But after that, I left mortal women alone. ❧

Sue Young Wilson grew up in Oak Park, Illinois, and attended Harvard University. She recently received a master's degree in journalism from Columbia University and has worked as a management consultant and a newspaper reporter. She now lives in New York City. Her previous work has been published in a British publication, *The New Oxford Magazine*, and in the Springfield, Massachusetts, *Union-News*.

George Barr made his first professional art sale in 1960. He lives in San Jose, CA, and has been providing illustrations for *FANTASY Magazine* since its first issue; we have also published some of his fiction. He won the Hugo as Best Fan artist in 1968 and has been nominated in both Fan Artist and Professional Artist categories.

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The Other Change of Hobbit publishes a "highlight list" every other month. Reading it is like having friends over to visit, who *really* know books. A few of the many fascinating items on the current list (hc=hardcover):

Barnes, John. **ORBITAL RESONANCE.** $3.99. Reprint 1991 hc. 1991 Nebula Award nominee. "An idea per page, at the very least. Real people on a real space station, with real problems and a great scientific underpinning. Recommended." — *Debbie*

Dunnett, Dorothy. **SEND A FAX TO THE KASBAH.** $21.95. Reprint 1991 British hc mystery, Moroccan Traffic. "One of the good Johnson Johnson novels, with other old friends." — *Tom*

Gaiman, Neil. **THE SANDMAN: SEASON OF MISTS.** $19.95. Reprints issues 21-28. New introduction by Harlan Ellison; artwork by divers hands. "Dream returns to Hell, and has an interesting time. I like this a lot, but it's not Gaiman's best." —*Tom*. Also recommended by Dave, who liked the Lucifer twist.

Hartwell, David G. (ed.). **FOUNDATIONS OF FEAR.** $27.50. Another thick anthology, a kind of sequel to DARK DESCENT, stories by Barker, Butler, John W. Campbell, Dick, Disch, Du Maurier, Heinlein, Lovecraft, Machen, Matheson, Pangborn, Pohl, Silverberg, Straub, Sturgeon, Scott Baker's complete "Lurking Duck"; many more!

Salmonson, Jessica Amanda. **ENCYCLOPEDIA OF AMAZONS.** $12.00. Nonfiction.

Vonnegut, Kurt. **FATES WORSE THAN DEATH.** $5.99. Reprint 1991 hardcover. Autobiography.

Yolen, Jane, P.J.F. **BRIAR ROSE.** $17.95 Sixth in the Fairy Tale Series edited and introduced by Terri Windling. Spectacular Thomas Canty cover. "This holocaust interpretation of Sleeping Beauty is not for the squeamish. Jane Yolen's tale of survival against great odds is thoughtful, moving and just a little bit predictable. A worthy addition to the superb Fairy Tale Series." — *Debbie*

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Turnabout

by Nick Pollotta

One fine summer evening, Prof. Felix Einstein and Lord Benjamin Carstairs were taking their constitutional through the nearby forest when suddenly a monstrous shape thunderously landed in the clearing before them.

"Halt!" the mighty she-beast roared.

In amazement, Einstein and Carstairs stared at the sphinx now filling the clearing. Built along classic lines, she had the head and breasts of a beautiful woman atop the body of a lion, plus a serpent's tail with a pair of great white wings fluttering from her shoulders. Thankfully, a golden breastplate covered her buxom bosom. She was a good ten meters tall and some twenty meters long. Her voice, though remarkably pleasant, was quite loud.

Hungrily, the sphinx viewed the tiny morsels. One was quite old, with a shock of white hair, and needed a cane to stand. Hardly a single bite for her there. Ah, but the other: a massive, tanned, slab of muscle some two meters tall. A meal unto himself! How delightful would be the aroma of their fear! How satisfying the crunch of their bones! How convenient their clothing for flossing!

Circumspectly, the elderly professor muttered to his companion, "Oh, I say."

"Quite," replied the unflappable archaeologist, raising a single eloquent eyebrow.

Annoyed, the sphinx frowned. These men were surprised, but the heady aroma of raw terror was blatantly absent. An angry growl welled deep within her

Artwork by Richard Sardinha

throat. Well, that would soon change!

"Greeting, humans!" she said in a booming contralto. "What are you two doing in my forest?"

"Just out for a stroll," replied Einstein promptly."And what are your next two questions?"

The sphinx spit in ill-controlled rage, the tiny globule of moisture hissing through rock and soil. "Impudent toads!" she snarled, the mighty breasts heaving. "Very well! What walks on four legs in the morning -"

"Man," interrupted Carstairs, stifling a yawn.

A pause.

"You...have heard these before?" she asked.

"Yes," replied the professor turning. "And that is three for three. Goodbye."

"HOLD!" thundered the giant beast, blocking their path with a paw the size of a living room sofa. "You must now ask me a question! And if I can answer correctly, then death will be your reward!"

Einstein and Carstairs exchanged glances.

"Ask!" demanded the monster licking her mighty chops, whiskers abristle with eagerness. She had been worried at first by their boldness, but the sphinx felt that she was back in control.

Quickly, the two men conferred for a moment.

"With the weapon and resources immediately available to us," began Lord Carstairs, "what is the surest, fastest, and easiest way for us to kill you?"

With an audible clunk, the beast dropped her jaw to the rocky ground, then closed it with a snap. For several minutes, her teeth ground against each other as the she-beast engaged in furious thought. Raking a clawed paw through her golden tresses, the sphinx stared hard at the two calm humans. Then, a sweet smile.

"Gosh, what a good question," she admitted, in a friendly voice. "I have no idea. You win! Goodbye." And with a single bound that carried her over the trees, the winged beast was gone.

"Sometimes, it really pays to have had a classical education," noted Lord Carstairs, as they continued the interrupted stroll.

"Quite," laughed the professor, leaning heavily on his cane. "This incident could have been much worse."

The noble's eyebrow raised once more. "Indeed? How?"

"Might have been another insurance salesman."

And the two men shivered in fear.

❧

NICK POLLOTTA is a 37 year old Republican with Virgo rising, although the political affiliation of his moustache has yet to be clearly determined. Currently, Pollotta lives in Columbus, Ohio, along with his beautiful wife Haviva and their son Jason.

He is also the creator, director, and one of the principals in the sf comedy troupe THE GUNDERSON CORPORATION, which has performed at many regional and national conventions.

RICHARD SARDINHA lives in Providence, Rhode Island and is the only artist we have for interior work who sends us oil paintings!

READ ME

The Fourth Street Fantasy Convention (the only convention I know of which has a copy of the Oxford English Dictionary in the con suite, complete with its magnifying glass) has a reading list of books which are mentioned repeatedly by panelists. The progress report says, "...having read some of them would give you a fuller understanding of what the panelists are talking about. The laws of perversity will, however, operate here as elsewhere: if you read half the list, the panelists will talk about the other half; if enough of you read the entire list, nobody on a panel will mention any of the books at all." In any case, it looks like interesting reading for fantasy lovers, so here's the list:

- John Gardner
  ON MORAL FICTION and
  THE ART OF FICTION
- C.S. Lewis
  AN EXPERIMENT IN CRITICISM and
  THE DISCARDED IMAGE
- Aristotle
  POETICS (many translations available; Golden and Butcher are both highly thought of)
- Dorothy Hartley
  LOST COUNTRY LIFE
- Donald W. Engels
  ALEXANDER THE GREAT AND THE LOGISTICS OF THE MACEDONIAN ARMY (not really recommended except to history fanatics and people who want to write about pre-industrial societies without making embarrassing mistakes)
- Caroline Spurgeon
  SHAKESPEARE'S IMAGERY
- Ursula K. Le Guin
  THE LANGUAGE OF THE NIGHT and
  DANCING AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD
- Joanna Russ
  HOW TO SUPPRESS WOMEN'S WRITING
- Bruno Bettelheim
  THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT
- Samuel Delany
  THE JEWEL-HINGED JAW and
  THE STRAITS OF MESSINA
- E.M. Forster
  ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL
- Frederick Turner
  TEMPEST, FLUTE AND OZ
- Alice Miller
  THE DRAMA OF THE GIFTED CHILD

The White Snake

by Mara Grey

"Hey, kid, where'd you get that stick?"

The gruff, tight voice came from an old man sitting hunched on the porch of a shabby house. Paint peeled off the siding, and the steps sagged; dead bushes lined the sidewalk.

"My dad's place, under an old tree. Why?"

The boy looked about fourteen: skinny, a bit too big for his clothes. He stood at the edge of the dusty summer road, a dog at his heels, swinging the stick.

Heat pressed down on the the house, on the road; the air smelled of dry grass and pungent weeds. Crows swooped and cawed over the nearby fields. The only shade lay under the porch roof, where the old man leaned forward eagerly, like a hound scenting its quarry.

"Can I hold it a minute?"

He tried to smile, but his face, like his body, seemed crooked, as if inhabited by something twisted, wrong.

The boy scratched one ear for a few seconds and looked down at the ground, then walked through the overgrown yard and up the steps.

"Here. I can't see what you'd want with it, but hold it as long as you like."

The old man didn't seem to hear. He fingered the stick slowly, caressingly, crouching over it like a miser over a bag of gold.

"Years I've looked," he whispered, "Years and years. But it was here all the time. The tree was here. Here! Who would have thought it?"

Suddenly he straightened up.

"Could you find the tree again?"

"The one the stick came from? Sure. I told you, it's on my dad's farm. Biggest tree in the county, maybe even the state."

Again the old man's mouth contorted into a kind of smile.

"I'd like you to do something for me. I'll pay you for it, fifty dollars. All you have to do it catch something for me, something that lives in a hole at the bottom of that tree."

The boy's eyes widened and his mouth opened in amazement.

"How'd you know there was a hole there? I never saw anything come out of it, though. You want to pay fifty dollars? That's crazy."

The old man pulled a battered wallet out of his back pocket and counted out five ten-dollar bills. He held them up in his right hand.

"Here's the money. I'll give you a sack and all you have to do is wait at the base of that tree."

He paused to put the money back in the wallet.

"There's seven snakes in that hole. Let the first six go, but put the last one in this sack and bring it back to me."

The boy tapped one shoe on the floor for a minute and stared off into the distance.

"How'd you find out about all this? What makes you so sure they'll be there? What do you want with a snake?"

"It's a secret," the old man whispered. "My father told me the secret when I was about your age, the way his father told him. I've traveled for sixty years, gone just about anywhere you could name, just to find the secret."

The boy looked at him warily, as if he expected him to jump up and foam at the mouth, like the madman he seemed to be.

"Well, okay. I guess there's no harm in looking. Where's the sack?"

The old man, his hands trembling slightly and his eyes gleaming with excitement, opened the screen door and went inside. A few minutes later he returned with a burlap bag and a piece of twine.

"Tie it tight, now. Don't want him getting away at the last moment."

"Don't worry. I'm good at tying knots. It's almost suppertime, so I might not be able to do it till tomorrow. Is that soon enough?"

"Sure. But bring him here as soon as you can. I'll be waiting."

The boy took the sack, called his dog away from the back of the yard, and strolled off up the street, still swinging the stick.

The old man ran a hand over his face, and said softly, chuckling to himself, "He'll get it. Just wait. He'll get it."

The old man spent most of the next day on the porch, watching clouds build up over the hot, flat land, looking up the road. He sat, stood up, and sat again.

Then, late in the afternoon, he went down the rickety steps and stood out by the road. The boy was coming, whistling,

Artwork by Laura Freas

alone. Across the road, the crows startled into the stormy sky, loud, complaining.

The old man reached hastily for the sack as soon as the boy came close, and looked inside.

"A white one, yes, I should have known."

"I waited a long time before the first one came out, then they came so quickly I could hardly count them. But the last was this one, as white as one of my dad's Sunday shirts."

The old man pulled out his wallet and handed the boy the five ten-dollar bills. Then he thought a moment.

"I've got an appointment in town in a few minutes, but I don't want to wait any longer. I'll give you another five dollars if you stay and help me cook it."

"You're going to eat a snake?" Amazement and a bit of disgust colored the boy's voice. "Well, so long as it's not me, I don't care. Why not?

Overhead, the clouds piled up higher; there was a roll of thunder.

In the kitchen, a small room with yellow paint on the dirty walls, the old man took the snake out of the bag.

It was white as frost, white as foam on sea-waves, white as the petals of plum blossoms, but its eyes were black, rimmed with gold. They seemed ancient, old, wise as though they'd seen worlds die, only to be born again. A red tongue flickered in and out of the small mouth as it tried to pour away from the old man's hands.

He put it in a pot on the stove, filled the pot with water, and lit the burner. Then he picked up a small metal bowl.

"Now, listen. The instructions said to seal up the pot, not to let the steam get out. I haven't got time, but here's a paste I made up. Put a lid on the pot and stick the paste around the edges. And don't you or anyone else eat a bite of that snake!"

"No way. I wouldn't do that for anything!"

The old man took a last look into the pot and whispered something to himself. Then he shuffled out of the room.

Rain spattered the windows and lightning pierced the dull afternoon light as the storm broke. Inside, the boy carefully pressed the paste into the crack between the lid and the pot.

"He's crazy. He must be. Oh well, it can't hurt to help him a bit. I'll leave as soon as he gets back."

Before he finished, the water in the pot boiled. As the boy tried to push a bit of paste over the last bit of crack left to seal, his thumb came down across a gush of scalding steam.

"Oh hell, that hurts."

He backed away from the stove, then stuck his burned finger in his mouth.

And the world changed.

First, all colors brightened. The yellow paint on the kitchen walls became a blend of many shades of gold, orange, silver; the shabby house almost seemed to glow. The cracked linoleum on the floor shone with a light that seemed to come from beneath it.

Then the sounds began, soft musical twitterings and chirpings, as if flocks of birds were perched just outside the door. In one direction, he could hear waves on a beach; if he turned another way, he heard wind blowing across an immense forest or a fire rustling on someone's hearth.

He stood in the center of the old man's kitchen, turning around and around, staring at the walls, the stove, the sink as if, somehow, they could help him make sense of what was happening.

He knew, he knew...what?

Feeling as if new eyes had been given him, the boy strained to use them, to stretch sight farther and farther, out through the walls, past the town, farther than he had ever traveled.

He thought of the sea and it was there, the waves pushing up a sandy beach, almost touching his toes, then sliding down, back into the surf.

He raised a hand slowly to touch the folded rock of a mountain, stooped to marvel at a pale, delicate flower growing out of a crevice, a crack at the edge of a cliff.

Suddenly, he had wings, and he leaned forward onto the wind. Soaring over a landscape a hundred miles wide, he looked down and saw rabbits, weasels, wrens, thrushes, quail. Each one spoke its own language, but each one's mind was open to him, understood.

Finally, he pulled himself back into his own body, still standing on the worn linoleum of the old house, still watching rain drip down the windows. He shook his head and leaned against the table, trying to understand what had happened.

The door opened. Chuckling with excitement, the old man strode into the room, then stopped as if struck himself by knowledge.

"You got it. All of it." His voice was flat, final.

The boy turned and met his eyes, unable to speak, to explain.

But he saw more than an old man; he saw the man there had been at twenty, at thirty, full of hope and driven by a dream of power. He felt an intolerable loneliness, a hopeless yearning focused into one desire.

Disappointment after disappointment came into his mind; the weight of years of longing for knowledge and finding nothing bowed his shoulders. His gift became burden as well as joy.

Pity burned through him.

"I'm sorry. The steam hurt my finger. All I did was put it in my mouth. It was only the steam. I'm sorry."

The old man looked at him a few seconds, then grabbed the pot and slammed it against the wall. Hot broth and what remained of the snake spilled across the floor, almost touching the boy's shoes.

"Get out, get out!" His hoarse voice cracked at the edge of a scream. "Get out before I kill you!"

The boy just looked at him with eyes already older than the old man's own and stooped down to put the meat and bones of the snake into the burlap bag.

Then he said, "This is mine. I'll bury it under the tree. I can't give you anything but this: if you go to the next town, you'll find a job, something small to help you start over again."

"Damn you, get out. I don't want your help. Just get out."

The boy closed the door, turned toward the rainbow gently touching the fields, and started walking. Inside, the old man picked up the pot and threw it at the wall again. Then he started sobbing. ❧

Mara Grey was born in Hawaii and live on the island of Oahu until coming to Seattle to study botany and zoology at the University of Washington. She has worked as a nurseryman, Master Gardener, and garden consultant. She lives on Whidbey Island (near Seattle) and makes her living as a professional Celtic harper.

Laura Freas, wife of Kelly Freas, lives in Los Angeles where she not only works as a commercial illustrator but also acts as her husband's business manager. She and Kelly are active fans of Regency dancing.

See page 64 to vote for your favorite stories and artwork. Let yourself be heard!

The Riddle-Trial

by Deborah Burros

For two-and-a-half years, the cat stalked the mage: the cat, who had once been Crown Princess Aurelia — until the mage, Perfidion, had betrayed the royal family, seizing the castle and slaughtering all except her.

Two hellhaunts, stronger than the roots of graveyard oaks though seeming as frail as moonlilies, had struggled to drag her, clawing and kicking, before Perfidion, who with small, pink hands had toyed with an iron vial. The mage kept twitching his nose at the reek of ozone, brimstone, and the metallic scorch of the throne's gold lions still sagging and running like wax. Overpowered by this were the honeyroses from the garden where Aurelia had hidden that clung to the rags of her velvet gown.

Overpowered by this was the miasma of blood.

Aurelia stopped struggling. The two hellhaunts loosened their grip just enough for her to push her tawny hair out of her eyes and glare at him.

Perfidion smirked at her. Aurelia had never liked the way he would smile as he went about his business as court mage, but this smile tried to befoul and belittle her worse than ever.

"Golden princess, I have destroyed enough beauty, so I will not slay you — merely render you harmless: the potion in this vial will focus on your essence and transform you into what you most resemble... A goldfinch? A goldfish? Perhaps a sprig of goldenrod?

"And you shall stay in this form unless and until the High Council, ignorant of your true identity, acknowledges you as queen!"

The mage unstoppered the vial and tipped it, letting one drop swell up and then hang for a long moment and then fall on the princess's brow. Aurelia crumpled to the flagstones and huddled there: a small, tawny cat.

She blinked her golden eyes. Colors were dimmer, but she was now aware of an expanded range of shades of gray and of every motion around her being sharper and fraught with significance.

The swaying of the hellhaunts revealed to her the trajectory of their swooping down and seizing of her — she darted through their feet before they could do so. They chased after her, but she eluded them in the halls she had explored since childhood. (Further magic against Aurelia was useless now, though, for she was now too small and swift a target.)

She began stalking the mage.

Lurking behind the tapestry in the feast-

Artwork by Barb Armata

ing hall, she watched him gnaw the bread until he found the cat hairs she had slipped into the dough. He had already rejected the butter indented with her pawprints.

Prowling in the mage's laboratory, she replaced the mandrake roots with those of horseradish. She sharpened her claws on Perfidion's thornwood staff, obscuring its glyphs, then clawed his mantle-of-flying to ribbons. She unrolled the ball of labyrinth thread, swatting it and racing after it until it was a tangle without beginning or end.

Curled in a bejeweled helmet in the armory, she waited for him to fence a practice bout with one of the hellhaunts — with foils that she had tampered with by loosening the protective buttons that blunted their points. Unfortunately, the hellhaunt was able to stay its thrust as soon as its foil became bared, so Perfidion was unscathed, though it had to endure the mage's rage, its tunic of albino bat fur becoming spattered with the quicksilver that is a hellhaunt's blood.

But no matter how riled Perfidion became, he never became careless enough for Aurelia to acquire the iron vial that he kept always about his person. And his person was always guarded by hellhaunts.

One of these hellhaunts was recognizable by the scars from the sabotaged practice duel that marred its diaphanous wings and by its hesitancy since then, though briefer than one beat of a moth's wings, to serve its master. Aurelia noted this.

She began to leave gifts for this hellhaunt to find: dead beetles from the garden, their metallic carapaces for stringing like beads into necklaces; the thickest cobwebs from previously undisturbed passageways, for lacemaking the ribbons that showed status. Until, one day, this hellhaunt happened to be Perfidion's only guard.

Finally, two-and-a-half years after being turned into a cat, Aurelia saw her chance. Springing up from the dazzle of a patch of sunlight, she tripped the mage, crashing him to the floor. The hellhaunt hesitated that not-quite-one-wingbeat to protect its master — enough of a delay for Aurelia.

She snatched the vial away.

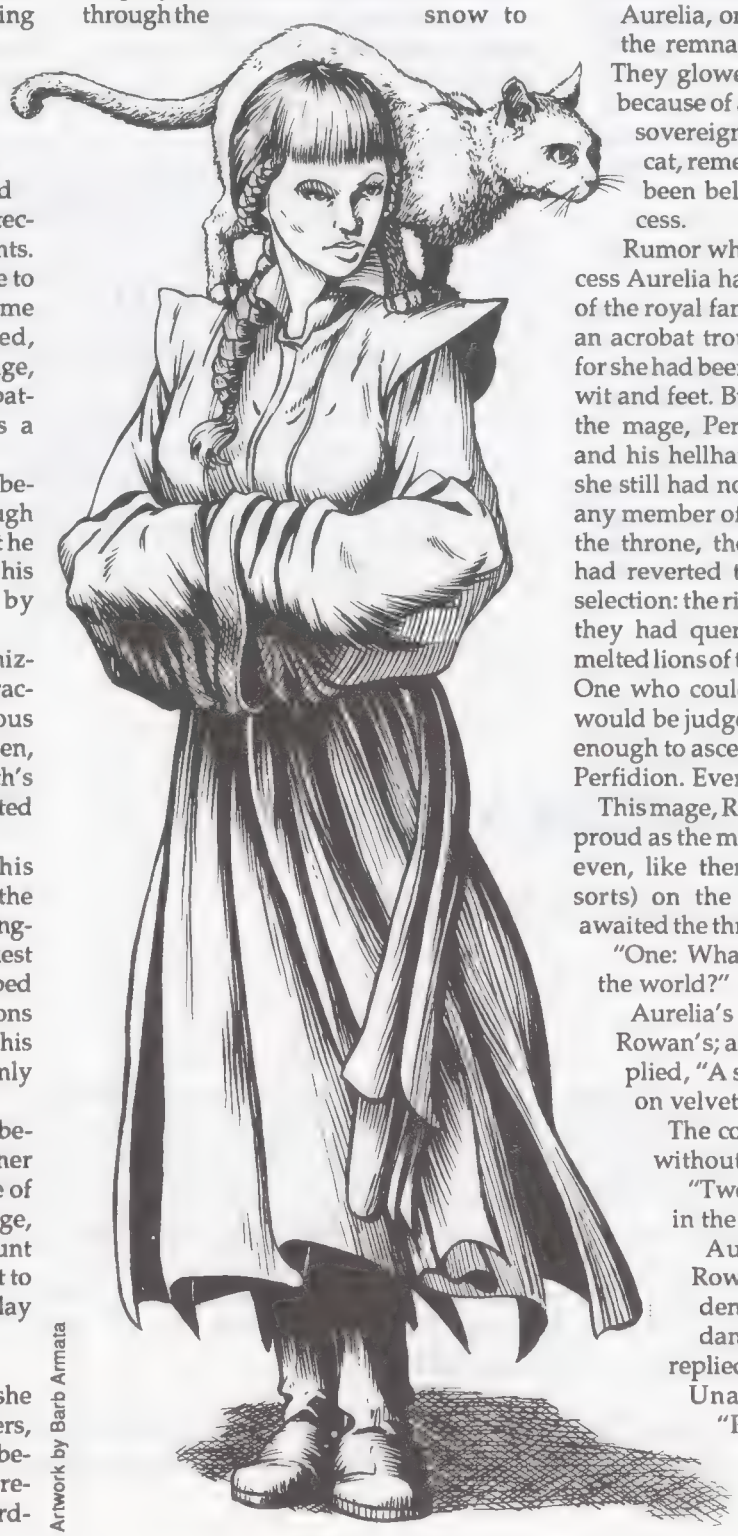
Later, using jaws, paws, and claws, she opened the vial. Crouching in the rafters, she waited for Perfidion to scurry beneath, then spattered him with the remaining potion. The hellhaunts guarding him saw that he had lost, so they deserted him, except for the hesitant one who could not flee because Perfidion had had it chained in his laboratory.

Perfidion liquefied into a mud puddle, then clotted into a rat.

Aurelia pounced.

Afterward, too fastidious to lick his blood off her fur, she washed in the garden's icy stream. There she broke off a spray of moonlilies and trailed it through the snow to the laboratory. She left the moonlilies at the feet of the unconscious hellhaunt, after inserting a claw and picking the shackles' locks.

For the next six months, the avenged princess roamed through the land, searching for someone who could and would help her undo Perfidion's alchemy, finding that one in the good mage, Rowan.



Artwork by Barb Armata

Rowan stood with the tawny cat, Aurelia, on her left shoulder before the remnants of the High Council. They glowered at her — was it not because of a mage that the realm was sovereignless — but beamed at the cat, remembering how felines had been beloved by the crown princess.

Rumor whispered that Crown Princess Aurelia had survived the slaughter of the royal family, perhaps in hiding in an acrobat troupe — not so farfetched, for she had been bold of heart and agile of wit and feet. But in the six months since the mage, Perfidion, had disappeared and his hellhaunts had fled the palace, she still had not come forward. Lacking any member of the royal family to claim the throne, the restored High Council had reverted to the ancient method of selection: the riddle-trial. For a fortnight, they had queried aspirants before the melted lions of the sorcery-blasted throne. One who could solve the three riddles would be judged wise, learned, or lucky enough to ascend the throne usurped by Perfidion. Even another mage.

This mage, Rowan, standing as tall and proud as the mountains of her home and even, like them, having a panther (of sorts) on the ledge of her shoulder, awaited the three riddles, as did Aurelia.

"One: What is the quietest thing in the world?"

Aurelia's golden eyes gazed into Rowan's; after a moment, Rowan replied, "A stalking cat's shadow cast on velvet."

The councilors agreed with her without debate.

"Two: What is the coldest thing in the world?"

Aurelia mrrowwed in Rowan's left ear, which prudently lacked the cat-teasing dangle of an earring; Rowan replied, "A cat's disdain."

Unanimously thinking, "Perfidion's heart," the councilors shook their heads.

Aurelia stared at

them with eyes like a pair of gold coins from an icedragon's hoard. Her fur bristled. Then she leaped to the floor, padded over to the throne, and, turning her back, proceeded to wash her shoulder without once deigning to glance over it at them.

Shivering, the councilors conferred amongst themselves and nodded assent.

"Three: What are we thinking?"

Aurelia padded back to Rowan, wound deasil around her ankles, and crouched with lashing tail by her boots; Rowan smiled at the cat and then replied, "That I have won the riddle-trial..."

The councilors exchanged looks; slowly, the High Council knelt before the mage.

"But it was this cat who gave me the answers, so *she* has won and is our new queen!"

The councilors sprang to their feet, objecting. The mage and the cat waited, letting the unmitigatible fulfillment of the riddle-trial be absorbed; finally, the High Council knelt before the cat.

The cat shimmered into a golden mist, spiraled upward, and solidified into the human form of Crown Princess Aurelia.

This time the councilors sprang to their feet in joy. They surrounded their sovereign — who was braced by Rowan while regaining the knack of balancing on only two limbs — to exclaim over, welcome, and question her. Aurelia graciously smiled, every inch the queen despite the rags that were all that was left of the velvet gown she had been wearing on the day three years ago when Perfidion had seized the castle.

Queen Aurelia ruled so well that her reign was known as "The Golden Age".

And in remembrance of what had happened to Aurelia, a female cat is known as a "queen".

❧

Deborah Burros, as you might guess, loves cats but is allergic to them, alas! (She's also fond of dragons but doesn't have any of *them* in her household, either.) She has worked as a copyeditor and copywriter for science publishers, and is completing her Master's degree in Library Science. This story is her second professional sale; her previous sale was selected as the first story for **SWORD AND SORCERESS VIII**.

Barb Armata lives on the East Coast where she attends science fiction conventions and displays her pen-and-ink work in their art shows.

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The Unjust Curse

by Patricia B. Cirone

The cold curled around her wrists like fetters, settling an ache into the bones. In vain, Relah tugged at the edges of her woolen sleeves, trying to stretch their slight comfort lower, to make up for removing her gloves. She tried to make her fingers work swiftly, but they were slow and cold, dropping as many twigs as they managed to poke into place. Awkwardly she dropped a couple of larger branches across the top, managed to poke a few more of the smaller twigs among them, and deemed it good enough.

The bundle beside her stirred, cried.

Relah twisted a few scraps of slip bark into the heart of the pile and lit it with the flint and steel from her tinderbox. She watched it carefully as it caught.

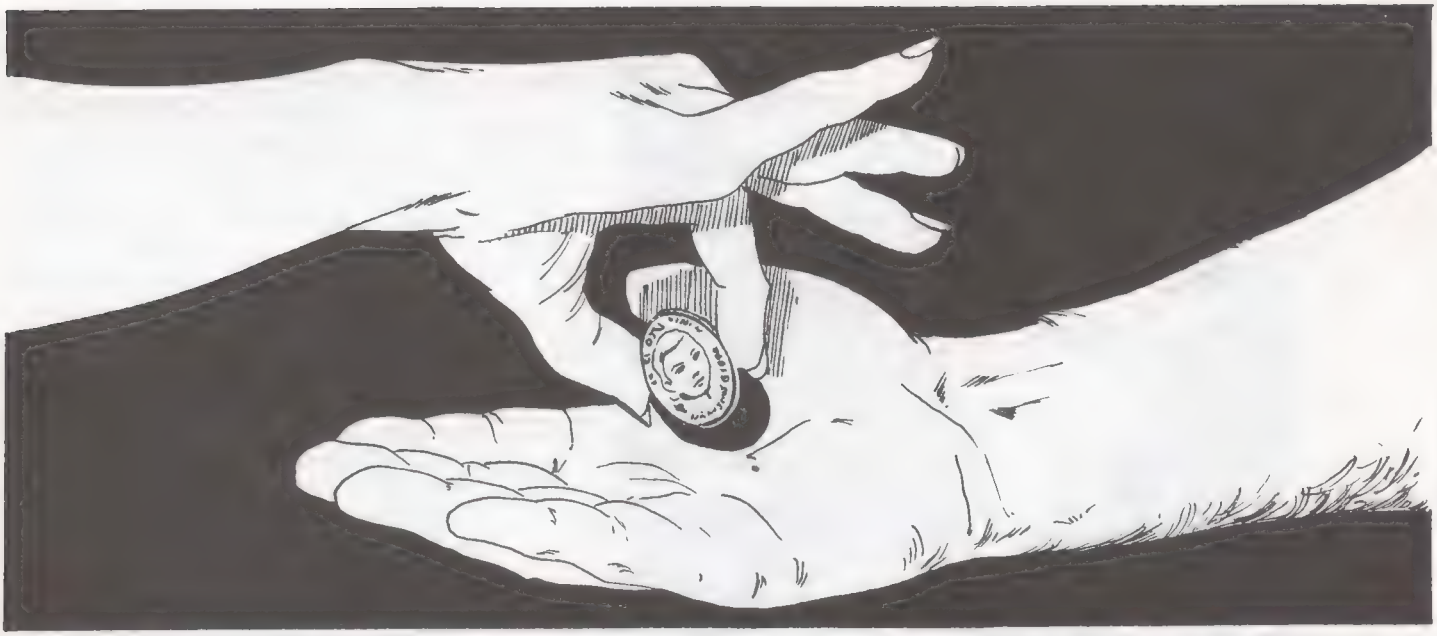
It would be a while before the fire started to give off much warmth. She shifted the baby back to its usual position against her chest, and with cold, stiff fingers, skinned the squirrel she'd caught for her dinner.

The baby's cry became relentless. With a calm born of experience as well as temperament, Relah ignored the plaintive sound, knowing there was nothing she could do until the fire had gained enough strength to allow her to bare a breast for nursing.

Thinking of that, she unstopped the pouch of goat's milk and downed a gulp. Even after all these years, she couldn't help making a face at the taste of it. She often thought this, out of everything, was the most loathsome aspect of the curse: having to drink milk, usually goat's milk. And not being able to drink spirits harder than an occasional ale.

The fire having finally caught and become a steady source of warmth, Relah added another couple of short, fat branches, spitted the squirrel on a long slender branch, and set it to sizzle just over the flames. She settled back against the trunk of the tree she had picked to shelter them and stopped the baby's mouth with her breast. Her mind wandered as she nursed.

It would have been warmer if they had stayed in the inn, a ways back. But then they would have had to spend tomorrow night out, and that promised to be just as cold. She would just need to sleep with her hands inside her tunic, so they wouldn't be too stiff to move when the baby woke her in the middle of the night, wailing for her to nurse it, yet again. Relah yawned at the thought. She'd better keep a fresh changing cloth next to her



Artwork by Dameon Willich

skin, too, or the baby would keep her awake longer than she could bear, whimpering at the cold.

This winter was as bitter as the one seven years back, but she would survive it. She always did. Just as she survived waking two, three times every night, having to make extra stops on the road, and having to travel swiftly while the wolves still wandered for fear of the child waking and crying.

She was used to all of it, so used to it, her hand, and feet did the work, without her thinking about it, usually. It would seem strange if it ended, if this was the last night she'd have to cope with a baby through the chill hours of the night and the long miles of the day. Tomorrow they would reach the final city.

The fire played upon the lines in her face. Deeper lines, and more weathered than a nursing mother usually had. She had neither the plump form of a farm wife nor the slight lines of a young girl. Relah was lean, and the sinews in her arms spoke of many years of wielding a sword. Even in repose, the lines of her face did not soften or give away her thoughts.

Relah seldom gave herself even the comfort of relaxing among her fellow mercenaries and guides, never staying in one place long enough to make friends. With her medium brown hair and average height, she would have been unremarkable as a wandering guide, except for always having a baby to breast. Over the years it had become noticed, and whispered about, since it was strange enough for a mercenary to bear even one child. Many wondered how large her family was, and where she stashed so many children, once they outgrew her arms. The Mare, she was known as.

It got her work; people were willing to pay to be able to say they'd hired her as a guide, and seen a baby in the pouch. Relah's reputation traveled to places she'd never been.

One of these was the walled, bustling city of Autrent. Relah, with the baby secure in the pouch against her chest, passed through its gates the next day.

People might have noticed her when she approached the doorstep of the wizard, for Berge was a Grand Master of the craft, and regarded with awe by more than those fortunate, or unfortunate, enough to live near him. But Relah happened to arrive there just before the noon hour, when thoughts of the food that waited and the work that still had to be done were preoccupying most passersby. Relah was quietly admitted before anyone could wonder what the stranger might want from such a powerful wizard.

A drably clothed servant asked Relah her business, and led her to a chamber that was anything but drab. As mercenary and guide, Relah had sometimes been in noblemen's homes; rarely had she seen more than three of four books together, even in the richest of them. Yet here, dark bookcases lined the far wall from floor to ceiling, and books thick enough to have taken years apiece to copy, filled them, spilled out onto the floor and chairs, and were piled on elegant, spindly legged tables. A weaver's fortune in red velvet drapes filtered the morning sun, and Relah's boots sank into a carpet as deep as moss on a tender forest floor. A carved desk wider than a cart dominated the center of the room and at it sat the wizard, dressed in black and rich jewelry.

"Yes?"

Relah sketched him the hand gesture of respect, and spoke.

"I beg of you a token, Great Master. I am gathering enough to call for a tribunal."

"Very well." The wizard dipped a slender hand into the carved wooden chest on his desk and handed one to her. Since she had not requested a spell be put on it, she owed him no money, and he dropped his eyes back to the manuscript he had barely stopped reading.

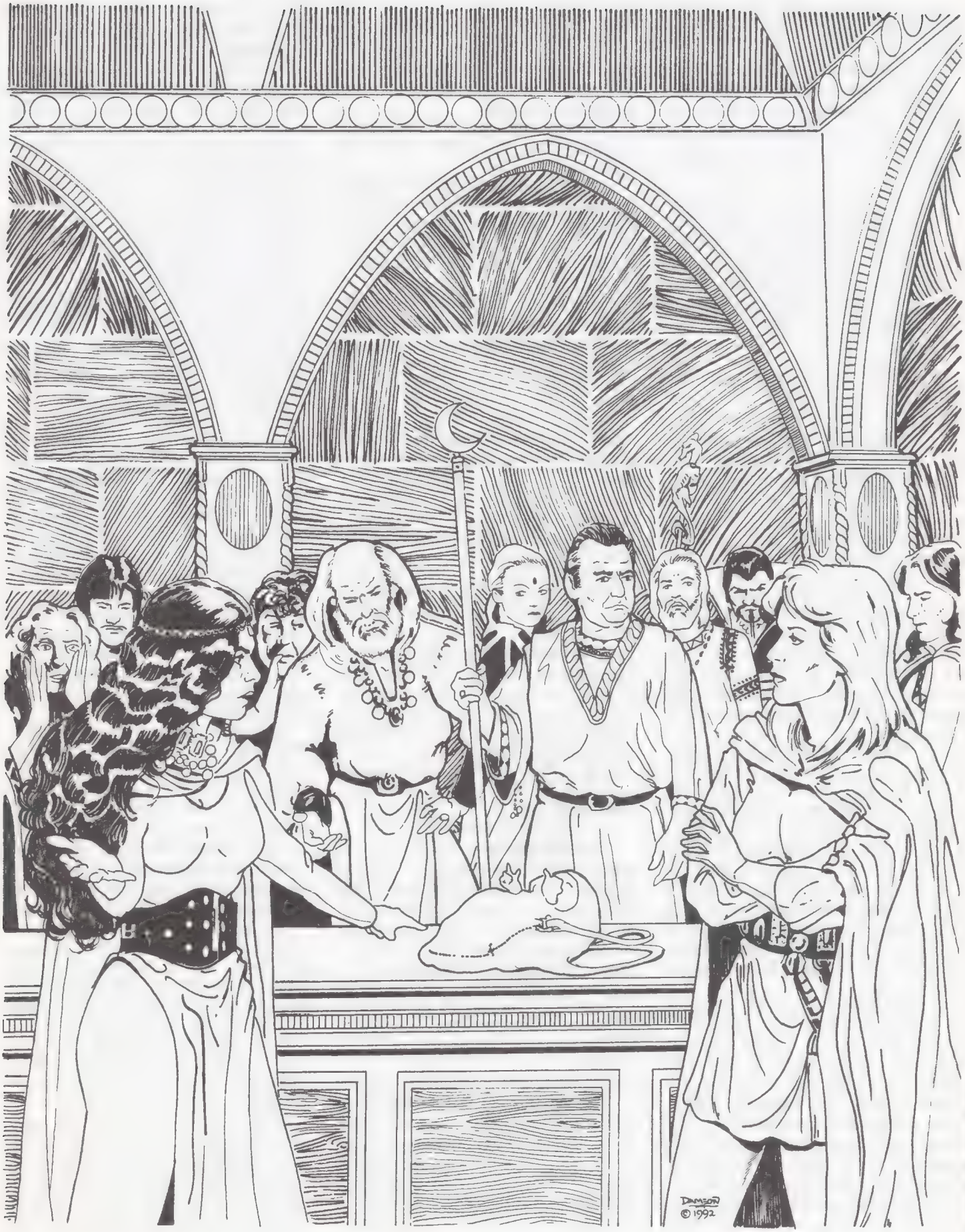
Relah stared at the wooden disk in her hand, carved and embellished with the wizard's profile, his signs of mastery, and those of his specialties. She felt none of the joy she had expected to feel, none of the triumph...not even relief. Maybe she had imagined this scene so many times, she no longer had feeling left for it. Relah took a deep breath.

"Well?" the wizard asked, impatient for his visitor to leave.

"I have the ten tokens necessary, now, Great Master. I bid you summon a tribunal, to redress a wrong."

"It is not just any ten tokens, you know."

"Yes. I know. I have the three from those who keep their powers hidden, three from those who travel the paths of foresight, and three from those who ease the burdens of the living. And one from a Grand Master, from you." Relah pulled them out of the pouch that never left the



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inside of her belt, and lay down the hard-won tokens, some of them worn and shiny with age.

"All of these practitioners must be alive, you know. You can only use these once to summon. If one of these is dead, you do not have a full tribunal, and you may not use any of these tokens again. You would need ten new tokens from ten different wizards."

Relah thought grimly of the six other, now useless, tokens in her pack, ones from witches or wizards who had died while she was still gathering the ten she needed. "I understand that. All of these were alive at the changing to of the year. Beyond that, I won't know until you summon."

"Very well."

The wizard stood, and motioned for Relah to follow.

The room he led her to was far different from the daunting splendor of the first. This one had scuffed floors and scarred work tables. Tall windows (costly, those) looked out over the street and let light stream into the room. This was where magic was done. Relah shivered, and put a protecting hand over the babe in the pouch on her chest.

One by one the wizard picked up the tokens. The air outside in the street shimmered, as if hot from the force of his calling. Relah's hand gripped the hilt of her sword and she averted her gaze. She could feel the wizard's eyes on her as he summoned the witches and warlocks at her bidding.

Part of Relah wanted to run, to leave this smell of magic far behind. She had never liked magic, never liked the twistiness of it, nor the people who were drawn to its practice. Yet she had spent the last eighteen years of her life tracking such people down, gathering their tokens for this day. Relah kept her face expressionless and endured the calling as stoically as she had endured cold, long roads, and discomfort. Nothing, not even her own fears, was going to stop her this day.

They came, as quiet as their summons had been. No explosions, lights, or scented smokes. For serious business, they didn't bother with the frills with which they embellished their magic for gullible clients. Before Relah needed to draw more than a few breaths, they were there. Ten. She recognized each of them: young Bart, old Geliel, silent Domita; faces she had tracked down, and now had had summoned through the tokens she had gathered from them. She had her tribunal.

The baby in the pouch stirred. Relah soothed it with one hand as she drew a deep breath and started the formalities.

"I accuse the witch Meledrial of casting an unjust curse."

"Do you have some item of hers by which she may be called?" the wizard Berge asked.

"Yes." Relah dug into her belt pouch again and dragged forth a tattered piece of cloth. "This was from a cloak of hers."

Berge nodded and held out his hand for the cloth. "We'll move across the hall. More comfortable."

He led them to another elaborate room, this one rich with chairs and silken smooth tables. Again Relah's boots sank uneasily into carpet; the pattern on this one reminded her of the signs on the tokens she'd surrendered.

The witches and wizards moved around amongst themselves, whispering and finally settling into chairs. Only Berge and Relah remained standing.

Berge closed his eyes and his brow furrowed with concentration as his fingers dug deep into the fabric of the piece of cloth Relah had given him. Like a figure seen behind a waterfall, the form of Meledrial shimmered, then slowly gained substance until she was standing before them.

She looked about her, wary, before her eyes focused on Relah. Her eyes narrowed, and understanding came into them. Her gaze dropped to the baby stirring against Relah's chest and her lips widened into a gloating smile.

Berge spoke. "Meledrial, you have been summoned by this woman to account for a curse she claims unjust."

"Unjust? I wouldn't say that."

"That will be determined," Berge said calmly. "She has gathered the tokens, and so is allowed to have a hearing." He moved over to a large, carved chair and sat down. Meledrial drifted over to the end of one of the large tables and leaned against it, her smile still mocking.

Relah stood, gathering her thoughts. This was her one chance, and none of these magic-mongers would be inclined to take her side, unless she convinced them.

"You may begin," Berge commanded.

"I will begin at the beginning. Nineteen years ago, when Carpon was falling to the Goths, two other mercenaries and I were given the task of conducting a party of women and children to safety. Three times we encountered raiding parties. Maon and Beril, the other mercenaries, were killed. We had no horses and little food. Our pace was slow, tied to that of the smallest children.

"Ten days out from Carpon we encountered yet another raiding party. Their horses stumbled over us in the dark. By some miracle nearly all of us managed to get away in the confusion...two women were caught, and I saw one child spitted on a sword, before I ducked down and fled after the others. We hid in a ravine, buried in the leaves. There were nearly forty women and children, hungry, cold, exhausted and terrified...but still alive.

"Meledrial was one of those women. She had made no mention of the fact she was a witch. I do not know if her skills might have been able to help us or not. A few fogs, or fires that didn't cast light, would have been a great boon, but perhaps these are difficult to work. I know little of magic, and, besides, it has no bearing on this matter.

"I do know she had a baby, and it was sick, with some chill. The child kept whimpering. I told her to hush it. The raiders, the bloodthirsty Goths who had whittled our party down by half over the past ten days, were searching for us. We could hear their calls, and the hooves of their horses. There was nowhere else to flee. We were safer in the ravine than the fields or the roads where we might be spotted and run down. I was only one woman, and could not hope to defend the entire group against a band of twenty mounted barbarians.

"Our safety lay in silence, in stillness. The Goths were not noted for patience, and would not search for us long, not even for sport. But for the rest of that night they were hunting for us. And Meledrial's baby kept crying. She could not hush it with ordinary comforts; she refused to stuff a cloth into its mouth. The raiders were working their way back to where we lay hidden; I could hear the hooves of their horses...I killed the baby."

A rustle passed through the tribunal, like leaves stirring. Relah took a deep breath. Meledrial's eyes glowed, burned into Relah, as if to score her with hatred.

"She stabbed my daughter with her sword," Meledrial spat, before Relah could continue. "Stabbed my baby, right there in my arms. And then turned to kill me, as well."

"I did not try to kill you. You were about to scream."

"Of course I was about to scream! What mother wouldn't at having her daughter massacred in her arms? I can still remember the feel of her lifeblood spurting out

Artwork by Dameon Willich

between my fingers!"

"You would have brought the Goths down upon us."

"What did I care, at that moment? My life was over; my daughter lay dead in my arms."

Relah passed a hand over her brow. "It mattered to all the others. It was my job to protect them."

"And kill me!"

"All I did was stop you from screaming."

"You choked me!"

"Yes, I choked you. And I killed your baby."

The two women stared at each other, stubbornness evident in Relah's stance, hatred in Meledrial's.

Berge's voice shattered the silence. "By the rules, the petitioner should complete the story uninterrupted. The defendant speaks second."

The black-haired witch simmered, but clamped her mouth into a tight line and turned her back on the swordswoman. Relah took another shaky breath, and continued.

"I don't know if what I did was right. I thought, then, that it was necessary, if the rest of us were to survive the night. And that we did.

"The raiders never found us. We stumbled to safety two days later, reaching Anjot, whose walls withstood the raids the rest of that season. Once we were safe within the gate, Meledrial turned to me, and cursed me for slaying her baby. She said she would make sure I would remember what I had done, every day, for the rest of my life.

"Two months later I conceived, despite taking my powders. I did not think anything of it at the time, these things happen occasionally in spite of the best spelled powders. I bore the babe and intended to suckle it until it grew to a good size, then see if I could find a home for it somewhere.

"Only the babe never grew to a good size. Oh, it passed the newborn stage, strengthened its neck muscles, but then nothing. For eighteen years I have carried a three-month babe in my arms."

Relah lowered the pouch and eased the baby out, placing her gently on the table before Berge, where everyone could see. She unwrapped the baby's blanket.

"Except for the weathering of her skin, she is any small infant. As she has been for the past eighteen years."

Meledrial moved from around the table and took two short strides forward. "And you think that is an unjust curse? I think it is very just. The most perfect curse I have ever conceived. You who hate babies, who think them a nuisance and a hindrance, who kill them, My God, *kill* them for no more wrongdoing than getting sick, are saddled with one you can't get rid of. You will be with a mewling, whining baby for the rest of your life. I laugh to think of it. I rejoice in it."

The eyes of Berge, and the rest of the tribunal, swiveled back to Relah. "I never hated babies. And I took no joy from killing yours. I thought I was justified. Perhaps I was not. I admit I did not understand, at least firsthand, the love a mother has for her child. Perhaps I could have quieted it some other way. Perhaps I was a little crazed from the exhaustion and all the death myself. But I do know there were other children there, with mothers that loved them just as much as

Artwork by Dameon Willich

you loved yours. And there was no hope for any of them, should the raiders have found us through your child's cries."

"Fine. They all live And your baby lives. And lives. And lives. I say it is just. A life in exchange for a death."

Berge looked austerely at Relah. "Meledrial is within her rights, under the law, you know. However right you may have been in deciding the baby should die to preserve the others, and even that can be argued, that has no bearing on her just right to curse you. You materially harmed her, and she is justified in cursing you to redress that harm."

"That is true, Great Master. But I am not arguing on my behalf, but on that of my child. The law says a curse may not seriously affect those who have not harmed the curser. Yet look at my child. She wasn't even conceived when these events happened. Yet she is trapped in a body that never grows. My daughter will never have the joy of running, or even learning to walk. She will never look on a tree and know it for what it is, never get to choose a lover, or a husband, or have children of her own."

"Your daughter!" Meledrial spat. "Your daughter wouldn't even exist if my curse hadn't brought about her conception. She is a function of the curse, nothing more. A tool, in the shape of a baby, to bring you grief and travail."

"No matter what the means of conception, once a child is conceived, it has full rights to a life of its own. That is the law. It is what prevents a witch from forcing a conception on someone else and then claiming the child as her own. It is what requires parents to nurture and care for their children, but let them choose their own lives and their own mates. It is the law. And your curse breaks it."

"Very well, then. Say she somehow has a right to existence, once she's conceived. Who's taking that away from her? She's alive. I'm not killing her — or taking her away from you. She has her own life. As a baby. How is that breaking the law?"

"I argue that mere existence is not enough. She has a right to grow and develop into the person she could become, were she not perpetually locked into infancy by this curse. If this curse was lifted, she would change. Therefore, she is affected by this curse and it follows: it is an unjust curse."

Meledrial fumed, her dark eyes beating into Relah's. Relah did not lower hers, but stared back, her back as straight as a sword.

Berge looked from Meledrial to Relah, and then to the rest of the gathered practitioners of the Art. "I think we have heard enough to make a decision. Unless there is something more...?" He looked from Relah to Meledrial once more. Both remained silent. "Very well. We will vote."

Each of the men and women of the tribunal brought their token up to Berge — the same tokens through which they'd heard the call, the tokens Relah had spent eighteen long years collecting while she scrounged for jobs on the roads and in cities wherever rumor said a witch or a wizard lived. On one side of each token was the face of the wizard who had given it to her. On the other were the signs of magic. A face meant a decision in favor of the petitioner; the reverse, a decision to let the magic stand. Each of the tokens handed to Berge was face up.

Relah felt some of the tension in her shoulders flow out. Berge added his own token to the array, face up also.

"Witch Meledrial, you are required to remove the curse from this child, since you have unjustly affected its life, and since it never did any harm to you."

Meledrial eyed the girl-child balefully. "Grow and develop, you said. She has that right, you argued. Very well then, it would be just as wrong to steal that from her, to steal from her the 'joys' of skinned knees, bumped elbows and seven years apprenticeship to a trade. I won't give her an eighteen-year-old body simply because she is eighteen years old. It would not be her body. It would not be this one, weathered, stretched, knocked and perhaps stunted by eighteen years of her own choices for its good or ill. I will not compound the 'harm' I have done her by creating a simulacrum of what she might have gotten on her own had my curse not held her back. I will simply lift the curse that kept her body from growing. You will still have a baby for a while; she will have to grow out of it on her own."

"That is all you are required to do," Berge replied.

Relah watched as Meledrial lifted the curse that only she could end. The rest of the tribunal watched and listened, to satisfy themselves the curse was truly lifted. Then Berge picked up the baby and handed her to Relah. "Justice is done. You may go."

She did, leaving that house, its smell of magic, and the simmering hatred of Meledrial far behind.

The baby felt no different — but then she wouldn't feel such a difference. Relah shivered. She would have to trust that those whose tokens she had collected had seen it done rightly.

She did not spend the night in the town, but left at dusk, putting as many miles as she could between herself and the city, stopping only to buy some food and hurry on. Chances were that Meledrial was no longer in it, either, but Relah didn't want to linger in a city that had contained her presence for even a few short hours. The road was cleaner; its odor breathed of natural things, of trees and rabbits and dew.

She made a campfire in the dark, her practiced hands finding the twigs and branches and strips of bark without problem. As the fire gained strength, beating back the cold, Relah's busy hands reached into her pack and drew forth a loaf of bread and a knife to cut it.

"Did you really mean what you said? That you brought the petition for my sake and not your own?"

Relah stopped, knife poised above the bread. Slowly her eyes swivelled to where the baby lay. Eyes met hers. Not unfocused eyes, wandering eyes, babyish eyes. But the eyes of, say, an eighteen-year-old. In the body of a baby. Relah swallowed.

"I should have known Meledrial would put a twist into it."

❧

Patricia B. Cirone says, "I used to wonder about writers who could rattle off the exact number of stories they'd sold. Well, 'The Unjust Curse' is the twelfth short story I've sold, and I'm still thrilled. In my other persona I review children's books, teach creative writing, substitute teach anything, and applaud at my daughter's gymnastics meets and dance recitals."

Damien Willich is a well-known sf and fantasy artist in the NorthWest.

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TURNING PAGE

The Master of Kanthuri

Dorothy J. Heydt

Peace is a good thing, Valmai told herself without enthusiasm. *The arts flourish, and children grow up underfoot without fear.* She tugged at the swordbelt whose buckle was trying to dig a hole into her waist. *And released mercenaries get the opportunity to lose that extra stone of weight.*

It had probably been a mistake for her to come to Kanthuri looking for work. The City of Sorcery, far from seething with intrigue, an ill-luck spell on every back and a dagger in every belly, a ready market for bodyguards —

The place was an immense bazaar. Little hedge-witches sold their herbs and charm-bags under every tree in the square. Glowing runes on the shopfronts offered locks, wards, self-starting rug cleaners, and cures for the gripes. Costlier spells could be tailored to your needs in expensive offices whose chastely labeled doors opened discreetly off the arcades. Nobody used so much as flint and steel any more, when he could buy a little dæmon to light the fire for him. And nobody troubled to hire a sword, when he could buy an Eye to guard his back for the price of a mutton chop and a loaf of bread.

Wrong phrasing to have used. Valmai swallowed and set her jaw a little tighter. And a little shiny thing came fluttering down past her eyes, twinkling like an aspen leaf, and fell at her feet with a little *plop.*

A silver piece with wings: small transparent wings, and as she watched, it shook them off like an ant-queen on her bridal day, and lay still in the dust. Valmai covered it with her toe and looked casually upward.

One of the window-shutters of the floor above, soft blue against the dusty white of the walls, was open just a hand's breadth. An eye peered through for an instant, and a white finger beckoned and withdrew.

Valmai yawned, stretched, and bent her back till it creaked. She tucked the coin in her boot and, scratching casually, wandered toward the front door of the house. The doorknob opened a blue eye and looked at her, blinked, and let her in.

The chamber upstairs was hung with dark silk, swathes of black and violet and midnight blue. The dark-robed occupant wore the gold mask of a Master Sorcerer.

"I think you are for hire," the dove's voice said, quiet in the quiet room.

"You think correctly, Mistress," Valmai said. "I can fight, shoot, ride, swim, carry messages, and hold my tongue."

"And you're not a magician."

"No, Mistress. I had a cousin once took up the trade, but it never called to me."

The gold mask tilted a little to one side, considering this. "Good," she murmured. "I propose that you shall go tonight to a feast at the house of the Master of the City. You'll be disguised, of course. You will eat and drink, but not so much as to get sick or drunk. You will keep your eyes open. If you bring me back the news I need, I'll give you a gold piece. If not, you have my silver already, and you'll have eaten. Are we agreed?"

"Sounds good to me, Mistress," Valmai said. "What news am I to seek?"

"Since the Trout Moon was new," the sorceress said, "there have been four attempts on the life of the Master of the City." She raised a finger, and the sight unrolled before Valmai's eyes.

A cool morning after rain, grey dawnlight shining on the wet flagstones, the last few torches still burning at the doors of a great hall. The heavy doors opened and three men appeared, dressed like princes for the hunt. Grooms led their horses up to the stairs' foot; the huntsmen began to descend — and the one in scarlet caught his right spur in his left boot and stumbled, and would have fallen headlong if his companions had not seized his cloak. He sat down in a heap on the topmost stair, rubbing his ankle, while the horses shied and danced and clattered on the flagstones...

A gold mask floating like a full moon above a brazier. Deep in the coals, small manlike figures danced, gold and glistening. A hand passed over them like a cloud; they crouched and crept like lizards, blue and cold. And the hand came down again, and they were gone. The gold-masked sorcerer covered the brazier with its lid, shrugged, turned away — and his flowing sleeve caught in the brazier and sent it flying. Coals scattered, the sorcerer's robe smoldered and flared. He shrugged out of it, cursing and stamping, as servitors ran up with buckets of water...

A garden where blue-flowered vines

hung heavy on trellises and white lilies lay on ponds that flanked the path. A lady walked between the lilies in a gown tailed like a peacock. A man in a scarlet cloak followed her, walking softly like a cat after a bird. But as he drew near her, he trod on her skirt, and she shrieked and jerked it from under his feet, and he did a little dance of imbalance on the path's edge and went headlong into the pool, while the lady screamed and screamed...

A high-vaulted hall, the scullions sweeping the floor and lighting the lamps before the tables should be set up for dinner. A man in cloth of gold striding among them, accepting their awkward bows with gracious little nods, till his spur caught in his boot (again!) and he staggered against the wall where a cleat held a fall-rope that stretched toward the ceiling. The man in gold pushed himself off from the wall and strode on, not realizing the rope had slipped from the cleat, strode on into the middle of the hall where the great chandelier was falling from the vault — but at the last moment he saw or sensed the thing, threw up his hand with a word of power: and the chandelier with all its flaming lamps came to rest in the air, an arm's length above his head...

"Well," Valmai said as her sight returned to her, "any one of those could have been a simple accident. But all four? I find I share your suspicions, Mistress. And you fear that someone's sorcery is working the harm of the Master of the City."

"Just so. Discover for me who it is, and I shall pay with gold."

"I'd have thought your own power could trace that power to its source."

"No," the mask said coldly. "Either the power is too well shielded, or the wielder knows me too well, and distracts when I search by showing me what I want to see. That is why you are going to this feast in my place." The white finger lifted again, and Valmai's own shape appeared to her, more closely mirrored than in any polished silver. As she watched, the image changed: grew darker, sprouted a pointed beard, put on a robe of gold-embroidered green and a well-fed paunch. Valmai patted it and felt emptiness, and the comforting hilts of her sword beneath the insubstantial silk.

"While wearing this concealment, you must not speak," the sorceress said. "I have given you the appearance of a rich trader from the southern deserts. Whatever anyone says to you, nod and bow and smile — yes, that's right — as if to keep them in doubt of how much you understood.

Artwork by Rob Alexander

"This is your admittance to the feast; and this, put it in your ear." The white hands held out a gilded leaf of parchment and a golden earring set with a green jewel. "Through this I shall be able to see what you see; perhaps I'll pick up something you might miss. Evening is falling; if you set out now you'll arrive as the doors open. Go: keep your eyes open, and *don't speak*."

Valmai reached the Master's Hall as the torches sputtered into light and the doors opened. Standing between a Tarkish princelet and the guildmaster of the coopers, she presented her gilded leaf and was passed in without a word.

She spent her first quarter-hour dis-

Artwork by Rob Alexander

creetly feeding. Tables lined the walls, full of little morsels that could be eaten without plate or knife. In the center of the hall a firepit had been filled with coals, and a little wizened cook stood there, glazed with sweat and the heat of his own fire, grilling little birds and sausages on skewers. Fountains flowed with wine. The feast proper, when the guests would sit down, was a couple of hours in the future. It was bad manners to eat as though you were hungry, but a nibble at one table and another added up. Valmai drank as much flavored water as she did wine, to keep her head clear. She prowled up and down the hall, looking at the tapestries and the furnishings and the glittering guests, and if anyone spoke to her, she bowed and nodded and smiled.

Trumpets sounded, and a murmur went through the crowd. Eyes turned toward the bronze door behind the dais. A gong shivered in the air, and the Master of the City stepped out in his cloth of gold.

It came to Valmai suddenly that in all those charmed visions she had never seen the Master's face. Now she saw it, and blinked above her dapper little beard: the Master of Kanthuri was a fresh-faced youth, perhaps twenty years old, perhaps not even that. Was the Mastership of the City a hereditary office? Must be, to light on such a young (if richly gifted) sorcerer rather than on his experienced peers. Well, if it worked, it worked. The Master had bright blue eyes and a rather engaging smile on his long-jawed face; he bowed to the company and waved to a friend across the hall. Then he put his foot to the steps and everyone in the hall froze, their sentences left unfinished, the food or drink halfway to their lips, watching. It was like the story of the enchanted palace where everything slept for a hundred years, from the prince on his throne to the flies on the dungheap, and the candles shone without flickering or burning down and the fountains paused in midair.

But the Master descended the steps without slipping, and the guests shook off the moment of rigid attention and went on as if nothing had happened. And of course nothing *had* happened. But it showed that others beside Valmai's employer had noticed the Master's string of near-misses.

He strolled among the tables, tasting and talking to the guests. Valmai circled, staying not too close to him, not too far, and watched him.

It was some minutes before she noticed that there was another circling the room as she did, watching the Master of the City: a man of forty or forty-five, his grey hair and beard neatly trimmed, wearing a grey robe that would have looked too plain to be in this hall, except for the light of gold threads that shone in the shadows of its folds. Pace, turn; a polite word to a guest, a nod or a bow to another: but always five or six paces away from the Master, and always watching him. The man did not look evil — but in this city of sorcerers and illusions, what did evil look like?

After a few more minutes she discovered two other watchers — constant watchers, as distinguished from those who glanced and looked away and glanced again out of the corners of their eyes between sips. There were two ladies, young and richly dressed, and one of them — if she would only turn her head *away* for a moment — yes, one who had walked in a peacock gown the day the Master fell into the lily pond. She was dark and the other was fair, and they stood together like sisters, whispering and watching the Master.

And he knew they were watching, and he too was glancing out of the corner of his eye. Valmai told herself to watch and observe, not speculate: there could easily be no more in this than young men and women looking at each other with desire. She took another turn round the firepit; passed the two watching ladies; bowed, and nodded, and smiled.

A singer's voice rose into the air, and many of the guests turned to listen. The Master of the City half-turned and took a step, his eyes still on the ladies, and (so it seemed) his ankle turned under him and he fell to one knee. For two measures the singer's voice hung suspended in the air, with no other sound to compete — and then the Master waved aside an offered arm and got up, his face flushed. Everyone started talking at once, drowning the music out. The Master continued his progress along the tables, but he seemed to be favoring his right foot, as though it hurt, or its sole were slippery.

Valmai, with four people to watch closely and the rest of the crowd to keep an eye on, felt her heart beat faster. It was like being in a skirmish, where she might be attacked from any side without warning and must watch all ways at once; it felt like familiar ground.

No wonder, though, that the sorceress had sought out Valmai to do her watching for her. Magicians had to learn to concentrate on one thing at a time, blotting out all else. Only the greatest could handle several spells at once. It made it hard for a sorcerer to fight, unless he could reduce the whole equation to *one* army equals *one* firestorm, flood, or elemental to take it out; and one purpose of the golden masks of Kanthuri was to induce a psychic tunnel vision.

The Master had turned away from the ladies now — his suspicions confirmed, perhaps, or maybe he was ashamed to meet their eyes after his stumble. Valmai reminded herself again how young the sorcerer was, most of his life taken up with a regime of training that had left him little time to notice girls.

The man in grey moved in closer to the Master. Valmai did the same, slipping in behind the Tarkish princelet to shield herself from view. She stood so close behind the Tarkite that she heard him mutter to the courtier standing next to him, "The man in grey, now, who's that?"

"The Lord Isvan," the courtier whispered. "The Master's uncle."

"Uncle, ha. And if the Master dies without issue, does the uncle succeed?"

"Oh, no," the courtier said, "he's uncle on the mother's side. No, the title would pass to one of the noble families, whichever could show the closest kinship. Descent is complex in this city, we've all married each other over and over again," and he laughed, a humorless bleat, as if his mind were uneasy.

Futter it, Valmai thought, *there goes my best suspect: unless he's been bribed...*

The Master had reached the far end of the room and was making the turn back, limping slightly; the guests used their respectful bows as opportunities to back away. The Master was walking through a little bubble of empty space, and he had realized it, and the red flush was returning to his face. If the steward of the house had any sense, he would call for the dinner tables now and get everyone seated before there was trouble. (But *Knives*, Valmai thought, *fish bones, glass goblets, a careless swallow that leads to choking.*)

Someone tittered — not the courtier in front of Valmai — and the Master whirled about to confront the man. But what stood there was no man. The first thing Valmai saw clearly was a thing like a seal's flipper, parting the air like a curtain and passing through it into the hall. At first it seemed to have no head; then it seemed to have several; and its body was like a thundercloud. Flashes of light flickered over it, like heat lightning before a storm, and the hall was growing very warm.

Artwork by Rob Alexander

Those guests who were sorcerers muttered and gestured, raising shields for themselves; the others hid behind them, or tried to escape from the hall. Lightning was moving over the walls now, and the torches were going out. And the Master of Kanthuri grinned like a wolf and raised his hands, a faint golden light growing steadily between them.

The thing bent like a breaking wave, and threads of lightning danced between its body and the walls, and it raised its flippers to throw a great bolt at the Master. The glare fell away from him like waves from a pillar of rock, and he laughed. The golden light, glowing like a tiny sun in the hall, rose from his hands and hovered above his head. A second began to grow between his fingers.

The Tarkish princelet and the nervous courtier had gone to ground, and Valmai had found at least partial shelter behind a fast-chanting sorcerer squatting toadlike behind a shimmering green barricade. She gripped the hilts of her sword and remembered that she need only say something, anything, to drop the fat merchant's semblance like dirty linen. And part of her was saying, *Well, now, this is more like it: rumbles, monsters, sorcery, maybe a need for a sword.*

Another bolt; another glowing ball — there were three hovering over the Master's head now. *(The boy's good. Blood and training, you can always count on them.)* The thunderous shape cast its bolt at his feet, as if the unseen shield were open at the bottom like a bell; but he leaped aside, light as a leaf, and the lightning burned itself out on the pavement. (Was this the same man who had tripped over smooth floors and his own feet?)

The three golden suns rose together and began to circle (three of them at once! The boy was *very* good). They swooped through wider arcs as they approached the thundercloud. It twisted and turned, trying to follow them, casting bolts almost at random; but they danced rings round it, and apparently it had nothing like eyes in the back of what might have been its heads. Fringed paddles raised, their tips blue-white with heat lightning, it tried to trap the golden spheres against the wall. Then while two of them distracted it, the third ducked in and got it from behind. It roared like an earthquake and began to collapse. The air tingled; its pungent smell was agreeable, like clean laundry.

Just as the thing was shrinking out of sight, the Master called out three words in a tongue unknown to Valmai, and a little, ugly, manlike thing appeared, no bigger than your hand. The Master spoke to it again, and it dived into the thunderous darkness just as it shrank to the size of a pumpkin and disappeared.

The guests picked themselves up and cheered. The Lord Isvan, sweat pouring from his face, embraced the Master of the City with what seemed like real affection. Valmai reminded herself to breathe.

The torches burned brightly again; the servitors crept out of the corners to right the tables that had toppled, sweep up the debris and mop up the wine. The little cook at the firepit turned his skewers and threaded fresh ones to replace what had burned. The Master slapped his uncle's back and turned toward the firepit, and — oh, gods, there on the floor where the brooms hadn't reached yet, that was a bunch of grapes under his foot —

"LOOK OUT!" Valmai shouted, but the Master's foot had already slid over the grapes and his impetus was carrying him straight into the firepit. Valmai took a flying leap, met him in midair and knocked him aside. (The sorceress's earring had fallen from her ear; she heard a little golden clatter on the floor somewhere.) They crashed to the floor together in a tangle, as close as lovers but not nearly so private. Valmai muttered, "Sorry," and rolled off the Master's chest; and in that moment she realized, *I know what's wrong. I know what the trouble is.*

The Master was getting his breath back. "Who are you?"

"I was the fat merchant in green. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Who *are* you?"

"Valmai is the name, Master; a hired sword from the west."

"Who hired you?"

"One of your fellow sorcerers, Master — she didn't favor me with her name — offered me gold to learn who's been casting spells against your life."

"I'd pay gold for that myself. Did you find out? Who is it?"

Valmai held up her hand to check the flood of questions. "Let me be clear: I haven't a clue as to who sent that thing." She gestured over her shoulder towards where the thunderbeast had stood. "I have a few ideas, maybe. That little creature you summoned — it's gone off to follow the monster back to its patron?"

"If it can."

"Then while you're waiting for it: where I come from, we have a saying, 'Who gets his hauberk?' In other words, if you died, who would benefit?"

The Master looked blank. "I don't

know."

"Here's my idea, Master: set the genealogists to figuring out who would succeed you if you died without an heir — and then find out who would succeed *him*. Just in case."

"I will." Valmai got up, and so did the Master, and saw the dark lady standing at the crowd, tears streaming down her perfect cheeks, while the fair-haired lady tried to tug her back. "Don't cry, Lindia," he said gently. "It's going to be all right." He turned back to Valmai. "Now. You were saying?"

"Ah. For your other problem, Master, I think I also have a few ideas — "

"You needn't keep saying 'Master'," he said. "My name is Ardani. I think we're going to be friends."

"I don't know if that's what you'd call it," Valmai temporized. "First listen to what I have in mind."

The doorknob opened a blue eye, squinted at her in the morning sun, and let her in. The sorceress sat in her golden mask among the dark panels of silk. "You managed to lose my earring at a very interesting moment. What happened?"

"Sorry, Mistress. It was knocked out of my ear during the scuffle when the Master nearly fell into the fire. But he escaped unhurt; don't worry. I've come to collect my payment, Mistress. You wanted to know who was casting spells against the Master of the City, that he might die in an accident. The answer is: Nobody."

"What?"

"I said, 'Nobody'," Valmai repeated. "The Master is seventeen years old. Since the time he learned to speak, he's been trained in sorcery and practically nothing else. They did teach him to ride — he's never awkward on horseback, or at his bench — but they left him to struggle through his adolescent clumsiness on his own. Sword practice or dance lessons might have helped him, but there was never time to spare; and because he saw so few people his own age, he never realized that youthful clumsiness comes to everyone; he thought there was something wrong with *him*.

"Do you remember your youth, Mistress? When it seemed that all eyes were watching you, and the more you tried to walk like a lady, the likelier you were to stumble? The gods know I do. Never mind. The trouble's named, the answer's found. The Master's going to be trained, with the sword and in the dance, till he learns not to trip over his feet. I give him half a year, maybe a little more; he's a quick study."

Cold eyes glittered behind the golden mask. "Get out."

"My payment, Mistress. I did bring you the news you asked for."

"You brought me nothing. Get out."

"'Who spelled the Master to trip and stumble?' 'Nobody,'" Valmai said. "I'll leave with my agreed-on payment, Mistress, or my lawshark will see your lawshark in the courts."

"You fool. Lawyers in this City don't work on speculation. Where will you find the fees?"

"I hocked your earring." Valmai smiled blandly as the sorceress hissed behind her mask. "You can have the token for a gold piece. Or would you rather traipse round to every pawnshark in the City, looking for it?"

"Take it, then." With her right hand the sorceress flung the gold; with the other, a bolt of darkness that seemed to go around Valmai or through her without doing harm. Valmai smiled again, and tossed back the pawnshard.

"Thank you, Mistress, it's been a pleasure doing business with you. Let me give you another bit of news for free. The Master's searching the underworld to find the chap who sent the monster; the temple clerks are searching the genealogies to find who might benefit from the Master's death. So if you were planning to find him and join forces, my advice is, Don't.

"Oh, yes; and Lord Isvan has opened negotiations with the noble family I-forget-its-name; the Master is going to marry and get an heir as quickly as he possibly can. Good morning."

"Go, then!" the sorceress spat. "Go: and we'll see how long it takes you to drink up my gold; how long before you're starving in the streets again!"

"Oh, please don't be concerned on my account," Valmai said. "I have employment for this half-year at least, maybe more. Training." And she walked through silence down the stairs and into the morning sun.

❧

Dorothy J. Heydt still has one husband, two kids, four cats, an indeterminate number of computers, and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. When not being fatigued she does temporary office work at UC Berkeley; when the fatigue becomes more acute than chronic she retires to bed with a pen, a three-ring binder, and Promethea the narcoleptic cat. One could do worse.

Rob Alexander lives with his wife Susan in Seattle, and regularly displays his work at sf convention art shows. He recently completed a trip to New York publishers, so you may see more of his work soon on book covers.

Be wise...

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Marion Zimmer Bradley Talks To Writers:
Tools of the Trade

I think I am getting tired at long last — not of manuscripts, but of manuscripts I couldn't buy even if they were any good. So I think in this column I'm going to talk about all those things which you should have learned even before you dropped your first manuscript in the mail. After all, I'm an editor, not a fifth grade English teacher, and I'm sick and tired of telling people things they should have learned way back in elementary school.

To put it briefly, before they — or you — take up a vocation as a writer, you should have learned how to use the English language correctly.

I don't expect every story I receive to be professional; but even if you were a plumber you would have to learn to use a monkey wrench. So I expect that before you submit your first manuscript you will have learned the most important tool of your trade.

I remember an old story about a writer who said to his students, "What's so hard about writing? The words are in the dictionary; all you have to do is put them together." Well, unfortunately, it's just not that easy.

When I was teaching a class in high school in science fiction I asked the class, "How many of you would like to be writers?"

Every hand in the room went up. Some of those students could barely read at all, and others wrote only with difficulty. So I'll tell you what I told them: the first thing you have to learn, before you even think of buying a book on writing technique, is English grammar and word usage. To this end, it is almost imperative that you read fluently and well — and often. It's much easier to write well if you are the kind of person who reads with ease and skill, and who prefers reading and writing to doing anything else.

As your career progresses, a day will inevitably come when writing isn't fun any more. That's when you forget about that first fine careless rapture, and hate the characters you used to love. At such times, nothing keeps you in front of the keyboard but the knowledge that after all, nobody told you not to be a plumber. That's what divides the amateurs from the professionals; the feeling that nobody is forcing you not to go out and sell shoes at Macy's; that, even when the going gets rough — the kids are crying, your husband wonders where his supper is, you're going to miss your best friend's birthday party, your bills are all overdue, your kid's sixth grade play in which she's playing Alice in Wonderland is tonight, you've served beans to your family three days in a row because you haven't had time to do the shopping, your husband may serve you with divorce papers, Christmas is in two weeks and your shopping isn't done, and you need to go to the dentist — you still stay home and write. Believe me, it really helps if you don't have to struggle just to put out a coherent subordinate clause, or pause in bewilderment over whether to use a comma or semicolon at the end of it.

I had a teacher on College English who said something I've never forgotten; she said that, after all, we were in college and we were expected to have mastered the elementary tools. So if the English — grammar and spelling — in our composition was perfect, she would give us a grade of C, just passing. After that, she would begin to grade on content.

First, there is this matter of spelling. I admit, and research shows, that good spellers are born, not made. If you can't spell, find a friend who can, and have him/her read and spell check your typescript. If you use a computer, install a spell checker which will find your errors. The editor will appreciate your trouble, believe me.

While you're at it, get a good — at least college level — review of grammar and usage. Learn to use *sit* or *set*, *lie* or *lay*, and *it's* or *its* correctly. Go through your manuscript before you stuff it in that envelope, and weed out dangling participles. Never end a sentence with a preposition, and don't split infinitives. (Here's the most famous split infinitive in television: "To boldly go where no man has gone before." Of course it should be "To go boldly where no man has gone before.")

If you don't know the correct usage — if nobody ever told you — at least get an English grammar text and find out.

Most editors — at least most of those I know — would rather have you ink in corrections than send in your manuscript with egregious misspellings. I would rather have a manuscript look less than perfect and be correct in content, because mistakes in usage annoy me and distract me from your story. Inked-in corrections merely make it hard to read.

When you're a best selling author of twelve or fifteen books and have become a virtuoso of language, you can take liberties with standard English just as artists take liberties with color and form. (Just remember, there's more to Picasso than painting both eyes on the same side of the face!) Until then, make your manuscripts stand out from the rest by making them look professional. They should be typewritten, double-spaced, and with perfect grammar and spelling. Then I can pay attention to your story. That's what you want, isn't it?

— *Marion Zimmer Bradley*

Writers Talk Back:
The Next Generation
by Meg Heydt

"Okay, so the heroine's name is...oh rats! Um, Zelda! Naw, that's too stupid, um...Mary! That's it! I'll call her Mary! Okay, now what? I've got the location, the descriptions of both the hero and the heroine, I need a name for the hero. Bother! What can I call him to sound cool without being too overused? Sebastian, that's it! It sounds all right for an elven lord too, uh...now what?" Alex's train of thought halted as she hit the stump that she always ran into.

"Mom, you busy?" Alex called down the stairs. No answer. She picked up her clipboard and danced down the steps from her room. She took a quick peek into her mother's bedroom. Nobody except Seamus, the black cat. There was only one other place to look: The basement where her mother had recently made an office. Alex waltzed down to the second of steps to the pantry, made a quick left, and knocked on the oak door.

"It's open!" called a soprano voice. Inside, surrounded by manuscripts, magazines, books, and stacks of boxes, sat Alex's mother, sipping her tea as her eyes fluttered down the recently printed-out page, pausing only to brush a strand of dark hair out of her face.

"Mom, could you give me a hand with this?" Alex said hopefully. Her mother swiveled in her chair to face Alex with a look of exasperation and disapproval.

"Dear, you know better than to bother me when I'm writing unless it's important." Her tone held authority but gentleness.

"But I was hoping you could help me."

Her mother rolled her eyes, shrugged her shoulders and gave Alex her famous *"I give up"* look.

"Okay, I was wondering if you could give me a hand on this," Alex said, indicating her clipboard.

"Oh really, Alex. You know I'm no good at math. I'm a linguistics major, not a physicist."

"It's not math."

"An English essay? I thought you could handle those." Her mother eyed her suspiciously.

"Oh no, this has nothing to do with school. I've got this idea for a story. See, it's all about this class that takes a trip to the hills where there are a lot of trees, and this one girl separates from the rest of the group, and she goes wandering and really starts to enjoy herself, and ..."

"Get to the point."

"Oh, yeah. So anyway, while she's wandering around, she goes and finds the faerie picnic that's happening at this waterfall that shouldn't be there, and she notices that one of the kids from her class is there, and he turns out to be an elven lord."

"Well, that's nice, dear, but what happens in the story itself?"

"I, uh...well..." Alex's eyes darted around the room as she thought of something to say.

"You mean you don't have a plot? That's the most important part! Alex, you can't, no matter how hard you try, have a story without a plot; and I can't give you one."

"But —"

"Look, why don't you go upstairs and call your boyfriend or something?"

"I don't have one, and —"

"Well, that's another problem; you should." She turned her chair to the screen and started typing again. It was another of her signals. *"You may go."*

Alex stomped out of the room and ran back upstairs, all the while screaming her statements in her mind. *I know I haven't got a plot! That's why I came to you! You're the writer and my mother, or had you forgotten? And I don't have a boyfriend because I don't want one!* She felt as if she were going to break something or burst into tears. She sat on her bed and before she could make up her mind, Seamus padded softly into the room.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," Alex told the cat. "She won't listen to me, all she cares about is her writing and whether I have a boyfriend or not. She doesn't care about me anymore."

"Yes, she does. She just has a hard time expressing it."

"Yeah, I guess; but I still don't..." Alex's eyes suddenly went wide and she turned her head to face the cat who was looking up at her.

"Did you say something?"

"I did," said the cat.

"Wha...how could..."

"How could I talk?"

Alex nodded.

"Simple. All cats can speak your language. It's just that most of the time we choose not to. It's a rather guttural language. And please close your mouth. I don't need to see your molars." Alex snapped her mouth shut.

"Good. Now, on the subject of your story. I heard your mother's comments, and —" The monologue stopped. "Do you have something to say?"

"Yeah, what do you think of humans?"

"We never make psychological analyses of humans. We take them at face value."

"What am I at face value?"

"You are an attractive young human with long copper hair, amber eyes, and a beautiful singing voice. May I continue?"

"Of course."

"As I was saying, I have been around a bit, and I think what you're lacking is experience to draw on. That's where I come in."

"You mean you're going to help me write this?" Alex smiled.

"Certainly. I hate to see any of my humans sad."

"Oh, Seamus! You're the best!" She reached out a hand and scratched the tip of the cat's chin.

"Besides, you're the only one who will scratch my chin instead of crushing me in a soppy embrace," the cat purred.

Alex giggled.

Two months later, Alex received a check for the publication of her story.

"Alex, you never told me you had started writing," her mother beamed.

"I know," Alex coldly retorted as she strutted up the staircase to her room. Her mother looked after her with a sad look in her eyes.

"Thank you ever so much for the check," Alex wrote. "We both appreciate being recognized. We will send you our next manuscript in a few days. Thank you again, Alex and Seamus Peterson."

Alex chewed on the tip of her pen and then turned to the cat.

"I don't suppose you can sign your name?"

Seamus sneezed.

❧

More Than Wise or Foolish

by Larry Hammer

Once there was a man who lived with his pretty wife and three beautiful daughters. The younger two were bright and fair, like their mother. They were the most beautiful creatures for miles around, excepting only the elder. Elizabeth — for that was her name — being dark and handsome as her mother had been, was even more beautiful than they, and you would believe me had you seen all three yourself. Her stepmother, while not wicked, cannot be blamed for favoring her own, for Elizabeth had every advantage of age and of looks, and did not need her special attentions. They all lived, as they thought, happily, the mother doting on her two children, the father on all his three.

Now every young man and quite a few older from throughout that county and the next came to court the daughters. They delighted in their suitors but never settled on any one, for if they could attract such men as these, then surely tomorrow one even richer and more handsome would show up. Elizabeth felt this the most of the three, having more suitors for being both the most beautiful and her father's heir. But as the years passed, the suitors grew fewer, for they learned not to bother with the proud daughters who would flirt with all and marry none. Yet while some still courted, no one in the family worried that they might never marry, for surely the best was still to come.

Until one day, when the plague came, and none dared go abroad. The daughters were miserable for both the quarantine and the lack of pleasant company. Elizabeth perhaps felt the loss most keenly, but she handled it better, for she worked more than the other two, and the household chores drew her mind away. Her half-sisters were not so fortunate.

"Oh, whatever shall we do!" the youngest cried. "We shall all die of the plague!" cried the other. Their mother tried to console them, but to no avail. Soon enough, both were in bed, imagining themselves already down with the plague and about to die.

Their mother worried and fretted, and in the end went to the old woman of the town for help. "Old Mother," she said, "tell me my children are safe from the plague, or else give me a charm to keep them from the fear of death."

Now the old woman was wise, far wiser than you or I can hope to be 'til we are her age. She knew the way of the world, and immediately told the mother, "Everyone in your house shall fear death, and they will 'til they have that which is more than wise or foolish." She said no more, for all the mother pleaded, and the mother went home more troubled than she came.

There was nothing to be done but that Elizabeth should go out and fetch that which is more than wise or foolish, so the others might have it too. For was she not sounder than the others? and younger and stronger than either of her parents? She was more used to the work, and besides, as old as she was she would likely never marry, for all her waiting and dreaming. Her father blew hot and cold, for he was loath to send his most beautiful daughter and heir out into the world, but in the end agreed. So Elizabeth was sent off with shoes on her feet and a meal in her wallet, to get what was to be gotten.

She had many adventures but none of them happy. Men in fear of plague are not kind to strangers, such is the way of the world. She was weary, unused to walking all day for all her stepmother said. She was often angry at her sisters for falling ill and at her stepmother for sending her to find the cure, but never for long, for she did love them. After many days and months, she was close to despair, for she found not what she sought.

She was resting by the road in a forest, when she heard a noise behind her. A few months before, she would have screamed or run away in fright, but the cares of the world teach one to be less precious, and she only stood and turned to see who it was. Out of the trees stepped a beast of the forest, walking on his hind legs like a man.

And what should be more natural than that the beast should talk like a man and ask her who she was?

Elizabeth saw his teeth and strong claws, and thought courtesy would be wise. "Why please you," she said as calmly as she could, "I am Elizabeth."

And what brought her here? "I am looking for that which is more than wise or foolish, but no one can tell me where it is."

What, was that all? He could get it for her himself. "Oh, would you give it to me?" she asked. But wait, he couldn't give her something for nothing, she could see the reason in that. Would she do as he asked in return?

"Why yes, anything!" she said. Well then, all she would have to do was keep his house for a year and a night and share his bed, and she would have it, that was all.

Pruit! all, indeed! Now had Elizabeth been given this bargain a few months before, she would have thrown it back in the face of the giver. But the plague had shown no sign of passing, and she was no closer to that which is more than wise or foolish. At her age, she had been around more than once, and knew the hows and whys of what he asked. So if this was the only way it was to be had, well then, she would do it.

The two went to his home in the forest. The cottage was not large, nor richly furnished, but it was comfortable if you were alone, and livable if you were two. There were only a few rules Elizabeth must follow: that she cook and clean and keep the house; that she never wander too far away; that she must never go outside during the night of the full moon, for that was dangerous; that she must never kindle a light between midnight and dawn; and that was all.

At first the work was heavy, for while she had cleaned her stepmother's house, she had never labored hard, nor without servants, and she had never cooked. So for a while they both suffered through a share of dinners burned and breakfasts on dirty dishes, 'til she learned, as much for her own sake as his. She quickly discovered that she was in no danger of wandering too far, for she was too busy. Nor was it hard to remain in the cottage during the full moon, for the forest filled with howls and cries 'til Elizabeth was most afraid, and in the morning the trees were deeply clawed and torn. On those nights, the beast was gone before sundown, and did not return 'til after dawn, exhausted.

They settled in, and were even happy of a sort, and Elizabeth realized that nothing kept her but her sisters and her own promise and affection. For affection she had, for all his bargain was bitter, as she often and loudly complained. The beast listened to her tirades in silence. He was kind to her, and gentle despite his teeth and strong claws. Every night after sundown but before midnight, he would carefully extinguish all the fires and lights

Artwork by Allison Hershey

before they went to sleep. In bed, he never spoke, and came to her in the form of a man.

Because he came to her only in the dark, she did not know what he looked like. When she felt his face, she imagined him very handsome, possibly even a prince. But she didn't know, and her curiosity clawed and scratched at her, 'til at last, on the last night of her year, she could stand it no longer. "Surely it wouldn't matter this once," she told herself, "to light one candle, for my year is all but over." In the hour before dawn, she crept out and lit a candle from the embers. When she looked at her beast, she saw a plain, fair-haired man wrapped in a sleeping fur. Expecting her handsome prince, she gasped and woke him.

He was very angry. "If only you had waited 'til dawn, Elizabeth, I would have been free of my spell." For he was an enchanted prince. His father, the king, had offended the folk under the hill, and they had cast him into his magical shape. He returned to his own true form every night, to continue thus 'til a maiden should live with him of her own will for a year and a night without seeing him as he used to be. But now all was lost, and he must go back to the folk under the hill.

As he was leaving, he paused and said in a quiet voice, "I loved you. Good-bye, Elizabeth," and closed the door.

Alone in the cottage, Elizabeth was at first angry at him for having used her for his own ends, then at herself for being so foolish. At the end of three days she was melancholy, for she remembered his last words with sadness. At the end of another three, she grieved, for she missed him dearly, and she loved him. Having nothing else to keep her there, three days later she left for home, with shoes on her feet and a cloak on her back.

By then, the plague had passed and the world was more friendly, and her journey did not add to her misery. But when she arrived home, her family had not changed in the way the world had.

When at first Elizabeth had not returned with that which is more than wise or foolish, her stepmother and sisters had grown more anxious with every passing day, for without it, what was to stop the plague from taking them? or now, to keep it from returning? Their fears had worried at her father for a year and a half, and he closed his house to all visitors, even the few suitors who wished another chance with the passing of the plague. No one in the house would see any of the others, for fear of illness. Elizabeth quickly saw what little good came of wallowing in one's woes, and that they would be no help to her. There was nothing to be done but to find her prince on her own. So she set out again, for all that her family cried how dangerous the world was.

Artwork by Allison Hershey

But while the world was more friendly, it was no more helpful, for none could tell her where to find the folk under the hill. After many days and months, she came to a crossroads, where an old woman sat upon a stone.

"Good morning to you, Old Mother," she said. Good morning to her. And where would she be off to? "I know not," Elizabeth replied, "for I am looking for the folk under the hill, for they have the prince who promised to give me that which is more than wise or foolish, but none can tell me where they are," for she would not admit that she sought him because she loved him.

Pruit! that the old woman didn't know either, but if Elizabeth took the left fork, she would soon come to one who might, only be sure when she arrived under the hill that she gave as good as she got, for the folk there were dangerous.

Elizabeth thanked the old woman, and went off to the left. Soon enough, she came to a dark tower, and sitting on a stone by the road was a woman.

"Good morning, Mother." And a good morning to her, whatever her business was. Why, Elizabeth sought the folk under the hill, for they had the prince who promised to give her that which is more than wise or foolish, but did she know where they were.

Pruit! that the woman didn't know either, but if she went ahead on the road she would soon come to one who might, only be sure when she arrived that she gave as good as she got.

Elizabeth thanked her, and went off down the road. Soon enough, she came to a cave in the hillside, and sitting on a stone by the road was a young woman.

"Good morning, Sister." Things went

as before, only this time the young woman did know, for this very cave was the way under the hill, only she should be sure that she gave as good as she got.

Elizabeth thanked her, and into the cave she went, for you can be sure that she was not going to wait. She walked back, and around a corner, there she was, in an open country. She asked the folk there to take her to their king, which they did at once for few of our world visited theirs of their own will.

When she came before the king and his court, her prince was among them, but he would not speak. "Good morning to you, Elizabeth," the king said, for he knew her name.

"Good morning, sir." And what brought her to his country? "I have come for that which one among you has promised me."

The king spoke with the prince, and returned to her. What, was that all? After she had lived of her own will for nearly a year and a night with him, to free him of his enchantment?

"Yes, that is all."

The king spoke with the prince again. Was she quite sure that was all? for this surprised both the king and his captive, that she wasn't here to free him.

"Yes, I am quite sure. I only wish what I came for, for I have lived to my side of the bargain."

Again, the king spoke with the prince. Well, if she was sure, she was sure, only the prince wished her to know that he loved her.

When she heard this, she said, "No." She looked at the floor of the hall, "No, that is not why I came. I came because I love him."

And so she had all she had come for, since love is that which is more than wise or foolish.

They were free to go. Why? Only that, because the magic of the folk under the hill is all illusion and deception, only the foolish and the wise can be tricked by it, and the prince's spell was undone. They left the folk under the hill and went off to the prince's father to be married. The king was so glad Elizabeth had brought back his son, he gave them half his kingdom to rule over. They lived long and without worries, for they knew the best was still to come.

Did they live happily? Well, happier than her family, you can be sure, and for many a year longer, too.

But was their love really enough so that they did not fear death? Ah, now that I know no more than you, and neither of us shall, 'til we are married as long as they.

❧

Larry Hammer is a graduate student in physics at the University of Arizona in Tucson. He is considering switching to pure math to do a dissertation on applied topology to find out exactly how all his books actually fit into boxes when he moves — a process that amazes him. "More Than Wise or Foolish" is his first professional sale.

Allison Fiona Hershey is an eclectic artist and writer living in Southern California. Her published work has graced computer software covers, science fiction and fantasy publications, mainstream and not-so-mainstream periodicals. In addition to her freelance career, she is art director for The Dreamers Guild, a computer software design company. She is currently writing and illustrating a children's book about a girl who flies her own space ship.

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LETTERS

HARD TO DECIDE

Wendy Sornberger, Rexford, NY

Issue #16 is the best ever! I thoroughly enjoyed each story and article. The artwork fit every story perfectly.

This is the first time I've submitted a Cauldron entry and it wasn't easy...Picking only one of these stories seemed like an impossible task. I reread the entire issue, and Jennifer Roberson's story about "The Horse Who Would Be King" made such an impression on me that I went to the bookstore and bought all of her novels...

Thank you for including Parke Godwin's article in this issue...Mr. Godwin's words of wisdom should be read by any unpublished writer struggling with the rejections and fears the writing life inevitably brings.

Thanks, Wendy — that's exactly what we like to hear; and I'll bet your letter made Jennifer's day, too. —MZB

MORE ON STORYTELLING

Kate Bledsoe, Jefferson, GA

Since my letter has opened a can of worms, perhaps I should clarify my MAJOR reason for wanting permission from authors for the use of their work. I've never made enough money from storytelling to pay for costumes and books, much less pulled a profit, so that's a bit of a moot point — if I made any, I'd be glad to give the authors a fair share!

In storytelling, as opposed to directly reading aloud, it is often necessary to trim out a little detail to achieve a smooth performance. From a storyteller's position, such editing is liposuction; but to an author...it could fall somewhere between child molestation and infanticide. If an artist is at all uncomfortable with the prospect, I don't touch his/her work...

Kate kindly included an example of the kind of letter she sends to authors, and we have excerpted it here:

"Dear (Author),

I am a story-teller. Up to this point I have been strictly amateur and have done only the Bible story/Fairy tale thing. I am interested in expanding my repertoire and would like to use fantasy stories...

Your (story, from MZBFM #X) is one that I would like to use if that is acceptable to you. Any story that I 'borrow' from someone else would not be read direct, might be modified slightly to accommodate the spoken form, and the author would be credited by name...

I am aware that this is a rather personal request from a stranger, and understand if you do not wish other people to use your material. I appreciate the time you have taken in reading this letter. My compliments on your work; I will look forward to reading more of your stories. If you would permit me to use your work, please write to me at (storyteller's address). Thank you again."

Nicely done, Kate! I find it hard to imagine any author who would not be pleased to receive a letter such as yours. —JAR

THE GREAT TIGER-PUPIL DE BATE, RESOLVED!

Brian Wightman, Jamaica Plain, MA

In response to Greg Koster's concern about the accuracy of a story that referred to the round pupil of a tiger, [the artist] is correct, tigers have round pupils. Mr. Koster could have saved himself some scratches and the derision of his neighbors by researching tigers themselves, rather than the somewhat distantly related housecat... The housecat belongs to the genus *Felis*, and shares this place with the nocturnal, slit-pupiled mountain lion. The tiger, however, belongs to genus *Panthera*, and shares this place with the diurnal, round-pupiled African lion.

I would suggest, however, that Mr. Koster research tigers in the library, rather than use the method he tried for housecats.

Thanks, Brian! I went to the zoo with my trusty binoculars, but alas, all the tigers were sleeping. Are you SURE they're diurnal? Or maybe they're just lazy... —JAR

CLEARING THE AIR, OR...WHAT'S A FAN?

Elizabeth van den Berg Toperzer, Rockville, MD

I'm a little confused. I always thought a fan was someone like me — a consumer, non-writer, avid reader of fantasy. I'm sure there are other aspects of fans, but the one thing that I felt separated us from the "pros" was that we are non-paid and non-published. In your article "On Collaboration" (issue #16), you mention several collaborations with fans, which (according to my limited definition) then ranks them as pros. I realized that a professional can be a fan as well, but I've always thought that that still made them a professional who admires others' work. Perhaps you could define a "fan" for me.

The problem lies in your restrictive definition. I still consider myself a fan — an avid appreciator and reader of fantasy, although I am also a professional writer. Back in the 50s, fandom was the only family most of us had, so being a fan has a deeper meaning for me than it does for many of the younger fans. I suppose a "pro" is someone who makes a substantial percentage of his/her income from writing; we could quibble about the definition of "substantial", but I think you know what I mean. —MZB

FEEDBACK!

M. Louis Baumgart, Ortonville, MI

Let me compliment you on your magazine...I would like to see a continuing emphasis on heroic adventure/fantasy. Maybe more dark fantasy, but not horror *per se*...There are more than enough horror magazines out there...No novel excerpts!!!!

I promise — no horror, no novel excerpts. Of course, if I get GOOD dark fantasy and heroic fantasy adventure, I'll print it. —MZB

Why is the art in your magazine usually so much better than in the other prozines?

Our art is better because Rachel knows fantasy art and artists, and she continually seeks out new talent at the convention art shows. And I agree she's doing a terriffic job. —MZB

(Blush, blush.) —REH

I wish Mrs. Bradley would write more short stories.

Mrs. Bradley is up to her round-pupiled eyeballs in other people's manuscripts, and has very little time to write her own short stories! —JAR ß

Artwork by Hannah M.G. Shapero

The Seadragon

by B.V. Larson

The young Duchess tacked her tiny sailboat across the bay to her private islet. Only a few hundred yards from the shores of the palace grounds, her father had given it to her years ago as a child's playground. Now it was the only place she could call her own.

The islet sported only six rustling palms and several clumps of dense brush. Securing her boat to the jetty she jumped off and went straight to the tiny cottage at the islet's center. It was actually a playhouse she had long outgrown, but she was fond of it still. Seeing her go inside, the family of monkeys that lived in the palms greeted her by pelting the roof with debris.

Inside was a child-sized throne, a wall lined with neglected stuffed animals and a brass lantern. She fished about behind a huge stuffed sandcrab doll and found

the conch shell. Taking it and the lantern, she returned to the beach.

Settling down comfortably in the shade of one of her palms, the Duchess lifted the conch shell to her lips. A mouthpiece of hammered gold had been crafted onto the shell, which she winded like a hunting horn. She blew the same low mournful note three times, then lay back in the sand to wait.

After a few hours she saw a ripple of metallic green in the waves, but did not jump up or cry out. The sun was westering over the sea, and she lit the lamp. When the sun finally sank down out of sight the seadragon made his stealthy approach, slipping his long neck up out of the waves and onto the beach. The majority of his long body remained safely hidden under the waves. "You are cautious as always, Nilass," she said, rubbing her bare feet into the still warm sands.

"You are beautiful and patient as always, Duchess," came the deep, sibilant reply. Up close the seadragon's scales were clearly more than just green. They radiated a thousand colors, but primarily shades of emerald and magenta. "Hunters are ever vigilant, therefore I must be even more so."

"It is good to see you again, Nilass. I didn't know that you would come again to my call, it has been so long."

The seadragon regarded her with one golden eye. "You have changed much. In fact, I believe you are no longer a child."

The Duchess hung her head. She turned down the brass lantern's flame so that no sailors might be attracted to it. This part of the bay was patrolled heavily by her father's navy and quite safe from pirates, but it was best that no one saw Nilass. "You're right. It has been four years."

"Four years," hissed Nilass dreamily. He rolled his great long neck over, exposing his softer belly scales to the evening breezes. Out beneath the surf, his vast bulk rolled with him, kicking up a wave of its own. Sand dribbled from his nostrils and ran between his scales. "Could it have been so long? It seems like just days ago that I took you to the bottom of the sea. Do you remember that?"

"Of course," the Duchess laughed. She tossed a handful of sand at him. His fist-sized eye blinked. "That trip lives in my memory as the height of my childhood."

"I'm glad," he said, watching as a crab scuttled over the surface of his brilliant scales in search of prey. "But I sense that you have called me for a reason other than pure friendship. What are you brooding about?"

The Duchess sighed. "I'm of marrying age now."

"Ah, a matter of the heart! Would you have me eat a rival female, or capture a reluctant male?" asked the seadragon with sudden interest. He rolled back onto his belly, tossing the crab flailing into the surf.

"No, no," said the Duchess, laughing and waving her hands at him in amusement. "If only it were so simple."

"Perhaps it is."

She shook her head. "You make me feel and act like a child again. I'm grateful, but my problem is with my father. He would have me marry a man I don't know and have only met as a child."

Nilass rolled onto his back again slowly, so that a flock of terns had time to move out of the way. "Yes, the odd human custom of arranged mating. I find it lacking in passion."

"So do I."

"What then, will you ask of me?"

"I ask a great thing."

"Ask it," said the seadragon, closing his great eyes as if in sleep.

"Will you marry me, Nilass?"

The eyes snapped open and the neck coiled, lifting the great head up until it loomed over her, nearly at the height of the palms. "Marry you?"

"Get down!" hissed the Duchess, jumping up and scanning the horizon. "The men on the walls are sure to see you if they look this way."

Nilass ducked his head back down to the warm sands.

"Let me explain. I know that you are able to assume the guise of a human male. I am asking you to come to our island as a great sealord, asking for my hand in return for alliance."

"And how would I display my nonexistent navy?"

"I was hoping that you might part with some of your great stores of riches to purchase such a ship and hire a crew."

Nilass made a pained hissing noise. "I spent many years picking through wrecks to gather my possessions."

"Yes, and you made a few of those wrecks yourself, I imagine," said the Duchess wryly. "I know that I ask much, Nilass, but I feel I must ask it. It's your right to refuse, of course."

"Ah, but maid, we are more different than the bird is from the fish. You cannot know what it is to live through even a hundred years. I have lived through three millennia and still will live on when you are but dust."

The Duchess sat on the sands again and hung her head. "So you have no love for me in that great slow heart of yours?"

Nilass stretched out his interminable neck and laid his head flat on the beach. He snorted and sand puffed up from his nostrils like smoke. "I do indeed have love for you, my friend. The question is, would it be enjoyable to live as a human through one of your tiny lifespans? It has been long since I left the sea for any great length of time. I admit, the idea is intriguing."

"You wouldn't have to stay forever, of course. You could always vanish at sea and leave behind a happy widow."

Nilass nodded slowly.

"Then you'll do it?"

"Yes," came the rumbling reply.

The Duchess jumped up and ran to him, wrapping her arms around a wall of scales. She felt his body shift and realized that she stood in the arms of a tall knight wearing armor of magenta and green scales.

"You may not be mortal, Nilass," she told him. "But at least you are a husband of my own choosing."

❧

B.V. Larson is the Vice President of Development at a software engineering company that specializes in factory automation. At night he studies for his Ph.D. in Computer Science and writes fiction. He is a native Californian and for fun likes to swim, hike, travel overseas, build mudcastles with his son, and write more fiction. He's sold eight short stories, and his first two novels are looking for homes among the publishing giants.

Hannah M.G. Shapero is trained as an architectural illustrator. She has been a professional fantasy/sf illustrator since 1981. She has done covers for four Dark-over books for DAW (**THENDARA HOUSE, SWORD OF CHAOS, HAWKMISTRESS,** and **SHARRA'S EXILE**) and has illustrated many other books, games, and magazines. Her work can currently be seen in *Amazing Stories*. She still does architectural art as well as many portraits and other private commissions. Ms. Shapero lives in Falls Church, Virginia.

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Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean

The Gift of Death

by Glenn DeTurk

The Girok drums started again in the north, closer now, a low insistent throb that got under Kama's skin and mingled with the pain of her shredded arm and shattered hip. *The Girok are regrouping for a counter attack,* she thought. *They'll come at dawn.*

Kama reached under her cloak and touched the strips of cloth that she had wrapped around her torn left arm. Her hand came away dripping with blood. *It doesn't matter if the Girok come,* she knew then. *I'll be dead by dawn, unless I reach a healer.*

She looked down with pain-glazed eyes from her perch high in the smooth-barked kelinda tree and surveyed the battle scene below. The slashed and hacked bodies of both Rangers and the shaggy behemoth men-beasts called Girok lay scattered around the forest floor in black puddles of coagulating blood. All was still except for the hungry crows that cawed and flapped their wings as they gathered to feast on the dead.

Somewhere down there, hidden in the trees, there was one last Girok. Five of the hulking, loathsome beasts had attacked Kama's squad. The battle lasted only a few moments — a raging storm of tearing claws and ripping teeth — flashing swords — gushing blood — the hum and thwump of arrows — the crunching thud of clubs — and then it was over. Kama was the only Ranger to survive. Her left hip mangled by a club, her sword arm ripped open and rendered useless by a claw, she had crawled off and somehow, by sheer willpower alone, climbed up this tree.

Kama looked down through branches, searching for the last Girok. It had stumbled off, wounded, with two arrows in its side. Perhaps it had only wandered off into the forest to die. Or perhaps it was still out there somewhere, watching — waiting.

Kama shivered. The sun was going down and the temperature had already fallen below freezing. Between the cold seeping in and her blood seeping out, a thin blue haze had begun to cloud her thoughts. She knew she had to try to reach the main body of the army and find a healer soon. But still she waited. For wounded as she was, Kama wouldn't stand a chance if she met the last Girok alone on the ground. To keep herself alert, Kama focused on her hatred of Giroks.

She had been nine when the Giroks killed her father and mother. Twenty of the shaggy beasts stormed into her village in the middle of the night. Hidden away in a cold, pitch-black root cellar by her parents, muffling her sobs against her sleeve, Kama listened hour after hour to the terrible screams — screams that still haunted her nightmares — as the

Girok slaughtered every man, woman, and child they found.

After that day, Kama devoted her life to killing the Girok. Consumed by hatred, she spent countless hours practicing with the sword and bow. As soon as she was old enough, she joined the Tellhorn Rangers, the elite corps who defended the frontier against the hordes of Girok that periodically swept down from the northern wastes.

Yesterday as she rode into her first battle with the Rangers, Kama was excited. At last she was going to have the satisfaction of killing a Girok with her own hand — the pleasure of watching (and feeling) one of the beasts tremble and die beneath her sword. But once the battle began, Kama found it curiously unsatisfying. In the great movement of armies, she was only a small cog in a great machine. All around her, the mighty Giroks toppled like trees, but her sword blows were only a few of many that felled them. And even the wholesale death of the battlefield was not enough to quench her raging hatred.

The Girok army was routed, but in the confusion of battle Kama's squad was separated from the main body of the army, and just before dark the five Giroks attacked. For a moment, as the hulking beasts shambled out of the forest, Kama was possessed with a wild glee — at last she was going to get her chance to kill a Girok. But Kama, one of the first to fall, was cheated again.

As Kama's thoughts drifted through the swirling blue haze that clouded her mind, her foot suddenly slipped, and her hip slammed against a branch. For a moment, brutal pain shot through her body. Then as she bit her cloak to keep from screaming, a black wall crashed down behind her eyes, and she knew no more.

The drums had stopped and a fine snow had begun to fall when the knives of pain in her hip and arm jabbed Kama awake. She opened her eyes, wiped away the tears of pain, and then shook her head to clear it. But the smoky haze inside her mind would not dissipate. Her strength was fading fast, and Kama knew that she could wait no longer. Clenching her teeth in determination, she slowly, agonizingly made her way down out of the tree.

She was only ten feet from the ground when she heard something rustle through the bushes below. She froze and peered down through the slanting snow.

Then she saw it — the last Girok, staggering unsteadily through the forest, lumbering directly under her. Focusing all of her hatred into one killing blow, Kama dropped out of the tree and plunged her short sword into the great beast's back. The Girok screamed and twisted sideways. Kama's hip exploded in pain, and she nearly blacked out again. But somehow she held on to the sword, and finally the Girok toppled forward. Kama rolled to the side. The Girok grunted and made one last attempt to heave itself to its feet, failing to get beyond its knees.

The Girok turned and looked at Kama with pleading eyes. Kama stared back, confused. *Girok never surrender — they never ask for mercy.* Suddenly, the Girok convulsed, and then it collapsed and moved no more. Grabbing a low branch, Kama pulled herself to her feet. But as she stood over the still form of the dead Girok, instead of elation or triumph or even satisfaction, there was only a sick, empty feeling. The hatred that had filled her for so long was gone, and there was nothing else inside her to take its place.

Kama was about to turn away when the Girok's belly suddenly bulged out. At first Kama thought it was only a final death rattle. But then the bulge wriggled and shifted, and at last Kama realized the truth — the Girok was a female ready to give birth, and the infant was still alive within her.

Without thinking about what she was doing or why, Kama knelt down and with her knife delicately slit open the Girok's abdomen. As steam gushed out of the incision, Kama reached into the Girok and pulled out a squirming, pink baby girl.

As she cut the umbilical cord, the baby Girok began to squall. *Now what?* Kama wondered as she wrapped the infant in her cloak. Cradling the pink, helpless infant, Kama suddenly understood the pleading look in the dying Girok's eyes. "She wanted me to save you," she whispered to the baby. *Or kill you mercifully,* she added to herself. Kama looked down at the infant. "I killed your mother," she said softly. "If you live, you'll hate me and my people as I've hated the Girok."

Kama slowly raised her knife over the baby's breast. Just then, the baby wrinkled up her nose as a snowflake landed on it and made a gurgling noise that was almost a laugh. For the first time since the night her parents died, a flickering spark kindled in the darkness of Kama's heart. Kama's hand wavered. "What choice do I have, little one?" she asked. "If I take you back, my people will kill you; if I leave you, you'll die from exposure; and if I stay with you here, I'll be dead before morning." Then, from less than a mile away, a winding horn sounded the Ranger assembly. *Less than a mile,* Kama thought. *I can crawl that far, find a healer, and save myself. But what about the baby?* As if in answer, at that moment the Girok drums started again.

At dawn, a thousand Girok lumbered south through four inches of snow in pursuit of the human army that had destroyed so many Girok the day before. A scout brought Samo-Ket, the warrior-chief of the Girok, to the site of the skirmish. Samo-Ket looked at the dead with the glazed, faraway stare of eyes that have seen too much killing. She was about to pass on when she heard the half-smothered cry of a baby.

Protected underneath a human female, they found the infant. "What does it mean?" the scout asked Samo-Ket. "Why would a human save a Girok baby?" The warrior-chief looked down. Lying in a dark pool of blood, the dead human female clutched the Girok infant to her breast — her face frozen in a soft, satisfied smile. Staring at the tableau, Samo-Ket's glazed eyes slowly came back into focus. Then she bent down and picked up the girl child. "It is a sign that there has been enough killing," she said. "Sound the recall," she told the scout. "We're going home."

❧

GLENN DETURK is a Dartmouth graduate who has pursued a variety of careers from ski instructor to maitre d' to bookstore manager to a prolonged stint in the television industry. He now lives with his wife Joan and son Chris (and their Labrador Retriever, Toby) in rural Massachusetts where he supports his writing habit by selling real estate, teaching, and working in a bookstore.

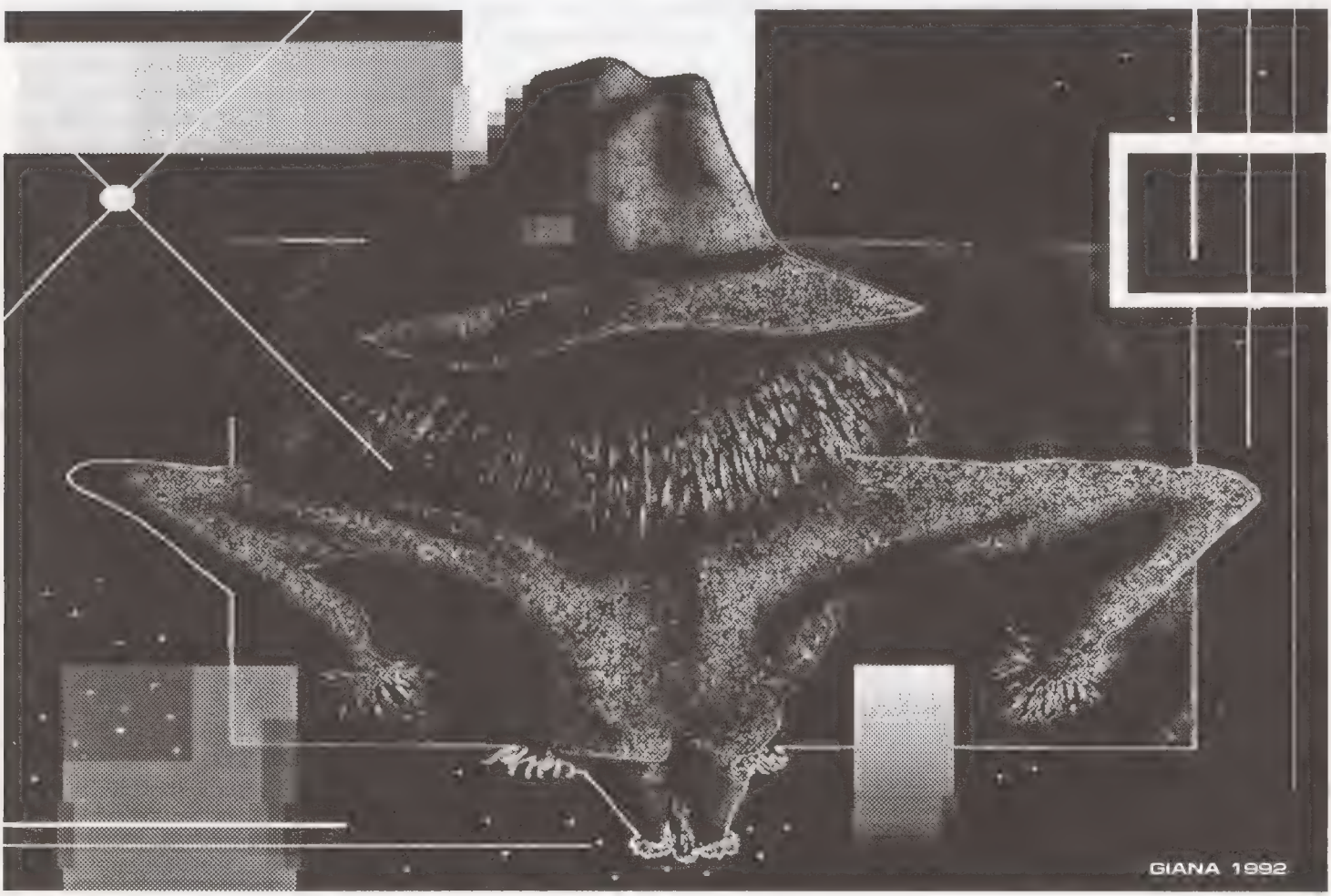
He writes poetry, children's stories, and short stories in the fantasy and horror genres, and has recently completed his first novel, tentatively titled **THE SILVER KEY**. "The Gift of Death" is his first story sale.

MARGARET ORGAN-KEAN studied art and art history at Boston University, Central Washington University, and University of Washgton. She has raised horses, done tech writing, and worked with computers. She lives in Seattle, Washington, and has been a professional illustrator since she was fifteen. In mid-1992, she was the Artist Guest of Honor at VikingCon in Bellingham, Washington.

Bogey Man

by Cheryl Edwards Gorman

He returns to Abraham's field each Spring, a crude figure of a man, stuffed with hay and fashioned of old dungarees and torn flannel shirt. His face is drawn with oily crayon across a piece of canvas; eyes wide and staring with crescent shaped mouth turned downward in a frown; then, tied around his neck, a nubby length of baling twine. With a pole thrust rudely inside his shirt, he



Artwork by Alan Giana

hangs to frighten away the crows.

When Abraham gave him life on that warm day of early April one year ago, he assumed his dutiful place among the corn stalks as decorative ornament and entertainer. Though scary by design, he had become very popular with the crows and felt himself quite an asset to the farm.

It was harvest time and toward the end of a curiously tranquil day, Abraham and his wife Julia gathered a meager crop of corn; the scarecrow, though absent of a tongue, watched and listened.

"Corn Borers," muttered Abraham, "not many good ears this year."

"Yes, but this field has been a horn of plenty for the crows," Julia said, "no thanks to our friendly man of straw."

"Agreed, but what is a corn field without a scarecrow?" said her husband.

"This cornfield in particular could do with one a tad more intimidating," she answered, "something like...a bogey man! Next year I'll take old Mr. Sociable apart and start over. With a little added costume, he'll give those crows a real panic."

Abraham chuckled softly to himself and resumed his careful selection of undamaged ears. A feeling of disquiet swept the scarecrow as he tried to picture Julia's bogey man within his straw filled mind, but he could not imagine such a terrifying specter. It suddenly occurred to him that he had been made simply for the purpose of sending fright into the hearts of all those birds. What a dreadful thought!

Soon daylight began to fade: an orange-purple glow painted the sky with color as the sun slipped below the horizon in search of a place to sleep. Abraham and Julia loaded corn-filled baskets into the old Ford and drove a short distance to their farm house.

Darkness came swiftly and found the scarecrow still puzzling and fretting over his impending change of character and dress. He saw a passionate moon rise and illuminate the corn field with such light that daytime seemed to have forgotten something of great importance and returned to seek that lost article, like a woman searching for her missing glove.

In the bright glow of moon beams, some object lying on the soil's surface glinted and blinked at the scarecrow, catching his eye. Freeing himself from the perch, he dropped between two rows of corn; his legs felt weak and wobbled slightly. Several days had passed since his last midnight stroll.

Hands of coarse hay reached down and lifted the sparkler from its soft sandy bed; perfectly formed and boasting a gilded, rosy surface, Julia's wedding ring twinkled in the soft light.

After studying the ring for a moment, the scarecrow stooped to place it back in the sand but quickly stood straight again with thoughts of a different nature. Perhaps after tonight, Julia would experience a change of heart where he was concerned and allow him to remain intact and without the added costume. Resuming his position on the wooden pole, the scarecrow waited out the night until morning could reveal a lost symbol.

Sunrise burned away the morning mist and brought Julia and Abraham to the corn field. They sifted through the many layers of soil and in between stalks of corn, but their attempt at finding the ring proved futile.

"It could be anywhere," groaned Julia. "I've worn that ring for almost thirty years and never lost it...Why now?"

"Don't worry, we'll find it," said Abraham. "It's probably staring at us from plain view but we can't see it for looking."

Julia raised herself from all fours and brushed the clinging sand from her clothes. She gazed at the scarecrow. Tied loosely in one end of the baling twine that encircled his neck was her ring.

"Abraham," she cried, "I've found it."

Together they stood before the scarecrow and wondered. For a moment his face seemed real to them, his eyes no longer wide and glaring, but more shaped and less like a cartoon. The mouth turned upward in a smile, and, as they looked, the scarecrow winked.

The scarecrow returns to Abraham's field each Spring, a crude figure of a man stuffed with hay, fashioned of old dungarees and torn flannel shirt. His face remains a piece of canvas, drawn with oily crayon; eyes wide open and staring; mouth crescent shaped, turned downward in a frown. Still silent, absent of tongue, the scarecrow watches and listens.

❧

CHERYL EDWARDS GORMAN writes, "I live with my husband and daughter, Lilly, in a suburb of Denver, Colorado, called Highlands Ranch. I am 36 years of age and have been writing for four years. This short story is the first work I have sold for publication. In addition to writing short fiction, I also enjoy oil painting, particularly seascapes and landscapes. My husband owns a small business which installs cable to run computer systems."

ALAN GIANA lives in Rhode Island and works at graphic as well as fine arts.

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A Wrinkle in Time

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Artwork by Sandra Templeton

F ↔ E ↔ E ↔ D ↔ B ↔ A ↔ C ↔ K

Roger A. Russell

First Session:

He sat in the waiting room, wondering how many of the people who had previously sat in that room thought about suicide.

Better still, how many people who had previously sat in that room wondered how many people who previously sat in that room thought about suicide?

Good question. Almost brought a smile to his lips. See, he thought, feeling better already. Thanks, Doctor. Sitting here in the waiting room did it. Sorry I left before you came out. Just send me a bill.

He uncrossed his legs, then crossed

them again. How many people tried to find reasons to bail out before their first appointment started? Another good question. But no smile.

And no receptionist, no button for him to push, no bell on the door that rang when he entered. What if she was sitting inside, unaware that he was here? Or what if he came at the wrong time? He thought he wrote it down correctly, two p.m. on Wednesday.

He looked across at her diplomas and license to practice displayed on the far wall.

She had gone to school in southern California for her Bachelors' and Masters' and received her Ph.D. in Houston.

He'd been in Houston once. Driven through the city on I-10 on his way from L.A. to New Orleans. Driven through it again on his way back. Hadn't stopped either time. Had seen lots of pickup trucks with gunracks across the back windows.

He had a gun, an old twenty-two. Could you kill yourself with a twenty-two?

He folded his arms across his chest. The irony was considerable: here he was seeking help from a person who could not know or understand another person as well as he could. And that was his problem, the thing that couldn't be solved, the thing he'd never come to accept.

He was grasping at straws. He should just go home. And...? He remembered a song by Rickie Lee Jones, "Last Chance Texaco."

Here he was, driving on the highway, miles and miles to go, coming to that last gas station before a great, long, barren stretch of desert, buzzards circling overhead.

Trouble was, for all he knew, he was already halfway through the desert, and the Last Chance Texaco had actually been two hundred miles back, unnoticed as he zoomed by. Or worse yet, there never was a Texaco, first or last chance. And what this was, this sitting in a waiting room, staring at diplomas and a license to practice, was a mirage.

He rose to leave. The door into the consultation room opened, and she walked out. She was rather tall, and she wore a pale blue, tailored suit with a minimum of jewelry. Her face was long and narrow and topped by dark, curly hair. She smiled when she said, "John Weston?"

"Yes," he said.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Louise Reavis. Were you leaving?"

"No."

"Shall we go in?" She gestured toward the open door.

He followed her into the consultation room. She shut the door behind them and said, "Sit wherever you like." She waved a hand at the seating arrangement, a long couch covered with undyed, thick-weave wool; a small love-seat at right angles to that and covered with the same fabric; and a small oak chair with a lightly padded seat and back. He chose to sit in the chair, and she sat across from him on the couch. On the wall behind her was a Monet print.

She said, "Did you find it uncomfortable sitting alone in the waiting room?"

"No," he said.

"Some people do the first time they come to my office," she observed. "They expect to be met by a receptionist."

"I had no idea what to expect."

"Then, let's begin. Tell me about yourself. What brings you here?"

Second Session:

"...That suggests that I ought to be disgusted by my work," she said.

He was taken aback by this line of thought. "I don't see that," he said.

He stared across at her. He tried to maintain eye contact, but found himself glancing down at her legs. She was wearing dark nylons, and her feet were crossed at the ankles. Her calves were slim. Her skirt just covered her knees.

"Well," she said, "you said that people have dark, disgusting thoughts and feelings inside, which normally they keep secret."

"Yes. And that bothers me. It's one of the reasons I came to see you." He wished he could tell her why he knew so much about people's secret thoughts and feelings, but if he did, she'd surely think that on top of being depressed he was crazy.

"I understand," she said. "But do you expect me to be disgusted by such thoughts and feelings?"

"Are you?"

"The question is, are you? So far, the answer is, yes..."

Third Session:

"...Let me see if I understand you," she said. "Are you saying that you never fail?"

"No," he said, wondering if he had revealed too much. "I'm just saying that certain things have always come easily to me."

She could hardly be expected to understand what he meant — he wasn't just saying that he held a high opinion of his own skills and abilities. No, he meant that in some cases, he succeeded the way a man with two legs could outrun a man with no legs. But he couldn't tell her that.

Once again, he doubted the efficacy of seeking help — yes, on the basis of his sessions so far, he could see that she was a competent and caring therapist, one who probably helped most of her patients, but in his case that was probably not enough.

"What kind of things?" she asked.

"Came easily?"

"Yes."

It crossed his mind that being a psychotherapist was another thing that would come very easily — he could do this sort of work much better than anyone else. That is, he could do it if he could put up with all the slimy, grotesque thoughts he would so easily see in his patients — whether they wanted him to see them or not. "Certain sports," he said. "Academics. Relationships with women."

"Do these things — sports, academics and relationships with women — have something in common?" she asked.

She was wearing a gold pendant over a silk blouse that buttoned to her neck. The pendant hung down between her breasts, and as glanced down at it, he found himself thinking of the many women he'd known.

"I don't know," he said. "What do you think?"

"Let's take sports. You found all sports to be too easy?"

"No."

"Which sports? Name one."

"Poker."

"Is that a sport?"

"I guess not, but never lost a poker game, unless I chose to."

"Never?"

"Never."

"You must be very good," she said.

He shrugged. "I've won thousands of dollars playing poker."

"What about academics? Straight A's?"

"If I wished."

"Women?"

"Not all women like me, but I can always tell who does. And I can always make them happy."

"All of the ones who like you?"

"Yes. Even some who don't..."

Fourth Session:

"...You think I'm conceited," he said.

"I have never said that," she replied.

"You don't have to say it. You've heard me say that people are sick and disgusting. And that I can succeed at many things."

"Yes, I've heard all that. But what you are telling me is that you are very unhappy. These things make you very unhappy."

He looked into her eyes. They were nearly lavender. He almost felt that she could truly see him, though his heart told him that was not possible. She could never see him the way he could, if he so chose, see her, or anyone, for that matter.

"And," she continued, "you are telling me that no one loves you."

"Not the way I can love them," he said.

"That does not make you grandiose."

"Then what does it make me?"

"Do you ever think of suicide?"

Fifth Session:

"...How are people disgusting?" she asked.

"We've talked about this before," he answered.

"Yes, in general. You've told me that people are basically repellent. As I recall, you said they were slimy and grotesque."

She was wearing a flower print dress. Her slim arms emerged from short sleeves and were placed one on the arm rest of the couch and one across the back of the couch. From where he sat, he saw that, while they were unpolished, her fingernails were well-manicured.

"I don't mean to be critical of people," he said. "I'm just realistic. That's how people are."

"Can you be more specific?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, can you give me a specific example?"

"Of how people are disgusting?"

"Yes." Her expression was blank, and her head was tilted somewhat to the side. Her mouth was closed, but her lips were not compressed. As he looked at her mouth, a very unpleasant memory surfaced.

"Okay," he said, "how's this? My father wanted to kill me."

"When you were a little boy?" she asked.

"No. When I was about sixteen."

"You're saying your father wanted to murder you when you were sixteen. For no reason at all?"

"We were having a fight about how late I could stay out at night."

"He was very angry?"

"Yes."

"Were you angry too?"

"I suppose so."

"How did you feel toward him?"

"Probably angry."

"You don't remember."

Artwork by Sandra Templeton

"All I remember is that he hated me enough to want to kill me. Me, his son. Kill me."

"He told you this."

"No."

"Then, how did you know?"

"I just did."

"I see..."

Sixth Session:

"...Yes," she said, "I understand how unhappy you are. Do you wish for that to change?"

"Why else would I come here?" he said.

"You feel that being here in my office is sufficient indication that you want your life to be better?"

He sighed and looked at her. How could her lips look so inviting, yet her expression be so bland, so noncommittal?

"What do you want from me?" he said. He should have left before the first ses-

sion. The Last Chance Texaco was looking even more like a mirage.

"Want from you?"

"You want me to cry? Is that it? You want me to break down and cry?"

"I notice that you always choose to sit in that chair," she said.

"What?"

"You always sit in that chair."

"So?"

"Well, I have, at one time or another, sat at each available spot to sit in my office. The chair you keep choosing to sit in is the least comfortable place to sit — with the possible exception of the floor..."

Seventh Session:

"...Maybe you could give me some feedback," he said. "I've been here several times. I've told you a lot about myself. Do you have anything you can say back to me?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I want your help. I came here for your help." He gripped the wooden armrests of the chair and looked across at her. She wore a dark, full skirt and a pastel-pink blouse.

"Is there something you are not saying?"

"What do you mean?"

"It seems like you have left out something important."

"Why do you say that?"

"Have you ever noticed how often your sessions become almost combative, as if I'm somehow pushing you to say things, or you're questioning my ability to help you?"

"I suppose so. But so what?"

"It's happening right now."

"If you say so."

"Perhaps this wouldn't happen if you'd say whatever it is that you're holding back."

"Well, I just said that I want your help. I don't remember saying that before."

"Perhaps psychotherapy is not what you want."

He looked at the Monet print on the wall behind her. It was of a field of red flowers with a woman and a child walking through them and some other people upon a slope above them. In the distance was a row of trees across the horizon, and exactly in the center of the trees was a house. The people were far from the house, and in some ways, they looked to him to be isolated. It was as if they had gone for a walk out through the rolling field of flowers, and though they were surrounded by beauty, and presumably they had sought to be out in that beauty, they were detached from the house and possibly so far away they would not, could not, find their way back.

He said, "I'm not sure there's anything you can do for me."

"That's not it," she said.

"What do you mean, that's not it?"

"That's not what you're not saying."

"But it's true. It's something I feel. Something I haven't mentioned before."

"Yes. But that's not it."

"I guess what I want is some feedback." He paused. "Like I said before."

"Say more."

"I don't know what else to say. I've told you a lot about myself, what do you make of what I've said?"

"You want me to evaluate you?"

"No, no. Just tell me what you think. Give me some feedback. You know. I'm sure you can do it. I give feedback to people all the time. Better feedback than they usually expect. So this time, I want someone to do it for me. Tell me something about myself that will help." He paused. "But you can't, can you?"

"That's still not it."

"Sure it is. I've thought about this many times. I've wanted you to tell me something about myself that would help, but I've been afraid to ask. I've been afraid to face that you can't do it."

"You're making an assumption," she said.

"About what?"

"About what I'm able to do."

"Look," he said, "I told you a while back that I don't mean to sound conceited, or, what did you call it, grandiose? But no one can do the things that I can do."

"Perhaps you should terminate treatment."

"What do you want from me?"

"Want from you?"

"Do you want me to admit to some disgusting thought of my own? How about wanting to kiss you? Is that a good one? You want me to say something like that?"

"No," she said. They sat in silence.

Eighth Session:

"...What is it that you can do that no one else can do?" she asked. "What is it that makes you feel so alone, so unloved?"

He thought for a moment about how to answer, then said, "Are you married? I can't tell, you're not wearing a wedding ring. I don't even know if you're heterosexual...But I suppose these are things you'll never answer. Do you realize that you answer most of my questions with a question? Don't answer that. Let's just assume that you want someone to love you. A man. Now suppose you found a man who does care for you and who knows you better than you even know yourself, knows your deepest feelings — your fears, your hopes, your desires — knows even the secret little things about you that you want him to know, but that embarrass you and you'd rather not have to say aloud. Suppose he is able to love you, cherish you, touch you, feel you, make love to you, in ways that no one has ever done before, because he knows you so deeply and fully and can anticipate and meet all of your unspoken needs, even the ones you don't know you have until they are met. Wouldn't that be wonderful? I guarantee you, you'd love it. Well, so would I, only no one can do that for me." He paused. "There's nothing more to say."

"You can do this for a woman, but no woman can do it for you?" she asked.

"Yes."

"You can see people better than they can see themselves?"

"Yes."

"And that disgusts you," she said.

"It disgusts me."

"You've also said that life is too easy, because you can accomplish nearly anything you desire. You can earn money by playing poker. You can get straight A's as a student."

"Yes."

"You're telepathic."

"Yes." He sat in silence, looking at the floor. "You think I'm crazy," he said. "Delusional."

"You can read my mind?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Have you?"

"No. I don't do it anymore. When I was a child, it gave me a feeling of power. Now it is empty. Or worse, I see things I don't want to see. I don't want to see into your mind. I'd rather not know the truth."

"But you just said you want some feedback from me. I take it you want to know how I see you."

"Yes."

"Go ahead, read my mind."

"What?"

"Do it now."

"Why? Are you trying to make me face my delusion?"

"Once, while I was in training," she said, "I met a patient who thought he was Jesus. In staff meetings, we debated whether to confront him. The ward chief, a psychiatrist who didn't believe in colluding with the delusions of the men-

Artwork by Sandra Templeton

tally ill, decided that, as the psychology intern covering the case, I should confront him. I was told to ask him to perform a miracle. The treatment team gathered behind the one-way mirror, eager to see the results. I did as told, I asked the man to prove that he was Jesus by performing a miracle. He declined. He said he didn't choose to. I said that, in that case, he couldn't prove that he was Jesus, and he certainly could not continue to claim he was Jesus. He just looked at me. Then he said that as long as he didn't choose to prove it, as long as he chose not to perform a miracle, no one, including me, could prove that he wasn't Jesus, and that was good enough for him. That was the end of the matter. I was never able to help him, and as far as I know, he's still in the mental hospital."

"You won't like it if I read your mind."

"Do it."

Did she really mean it? Of course, once he looked into her mind, he'd know. "Okay," he said.

He dropped the mental barrier that he routinely used to screen out other people's thoughts and feelings, and quickly peered into her mind. As it happened, he didn't look far, because what he saw first was so disgusting that he immediately withdrew and reinstated his barrier.

"Will you tell me what you saw?" she asked.

"You don't want to know," he answered.

"Yes, I do. Please tell me."

"I'd rather not."

"Are you disgusted?"

"Yes."

"Please, don't let that stop you. Tell me."

"Listen," he said, "let's just drop it. I don't need to prove that I'm telepathic. And there is nothing you can do to help me. Just figure I'm deluded. I know my session isn't over, but I'm going now." He wiped his hand across his forehead and rose from the chair.

She also rose. "Of course, you're free to go," she said, "but before you do, I wish you'd consider that there is something you don't want to face, and it's not whether or not you're deluded about being telepathic."

"Like what?" he asked.

"First, let me tell me what you saw. When you looked into my mind, you saw an image of yourself. You were crouched in a corner, naked, covered with filth. That's what you saw."

"Good for you — you know your own mind. I suppose that's to be expected, a person in your profession. So what? You think I shouldn't be upset? It's still disgusting."

"It doesn't upset me."

"Great. You're not only self-aware, you're self-accepting. Is this another object lesson? Like your quaint story about the man who thought he was Jesus?"

She actually smiled. "No, that's not what I had in mind." She laughed. "But in a way you're right, because I am trying to show you something."

"So now you think it's funny."

"I'm laughing at myself. I do try to know my own mind, but I don't always know everything. You spotted something I hadn't seen. I thought I was just giving you feedback."

"Feedback?"

"Yes. I showed you how you see yourself. That isn't how I see you. That's how you see you."

"What?"

"Feedback. You understand the principle of feedback, don't you?"

"Yes." His thoughts were reeling. A disturbing comprehension lurked just beneath conscious awareness.

"Of course, feedback like that can be quite hazardous, but I know the necessary precautions."

Full comprehension surfaced. "That was how I see myself?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, "that's what I saw in your mind. I think if you'll take a look at your own thoughts, you'll find that image right there next to your memory of

your father's impulse to kill you — along with your impulse to kill him. There have been some things you have been keeping from yourself."

"Denial?"

"More like avoidance. We all do it, now and then."

He looked into his own mind. The image was difficult to locate, but behind a veil of disgust he perceived a vague sense of it — along with some other repellent images and feeling — and he knew she was right.

"You've been disgusted by others, but you are also disgusted by yourself," she said. "Perhaps that's been the problem."

He felt numb. He found himself sitting back down. "You really aren't disgusted, are you?" he asked.

"I'm really not," she answered, as she sat down.

"And you can help me?"

"I can try. Let down your barrier again, and let's find out..."

❧

ROGER A. RUSSELL is in his 40s and lives with his wife, young daughter, and cat near Los Angeles. He got his first rejection (from *F&SF*) at age 12 but persevered and earned a B.A. in English. He suspended his writing efforts for 20 years then started attending workshops, buying books on writing, and making an effort to write every single day. He has been rewarded with several non-fiction sales; this story is his first fiction publication.

SANDRA TEMPLETON enjoys fantasy and lives with her family near Kansas City.

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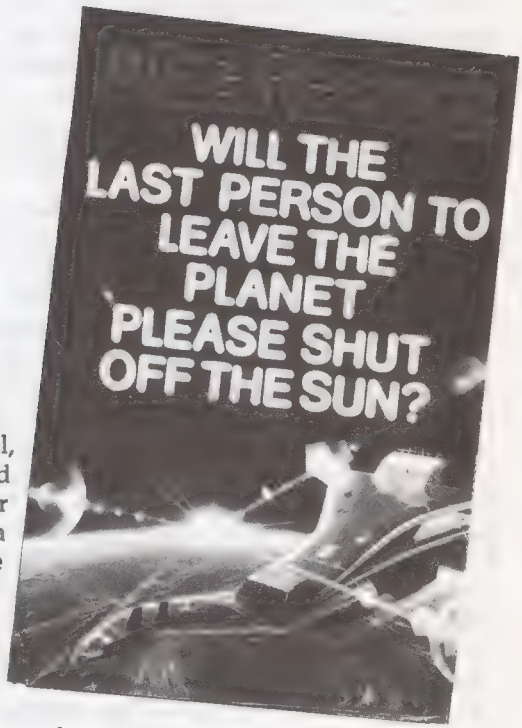
Interview:

Mike Resnick

by Darrell Schweitzer

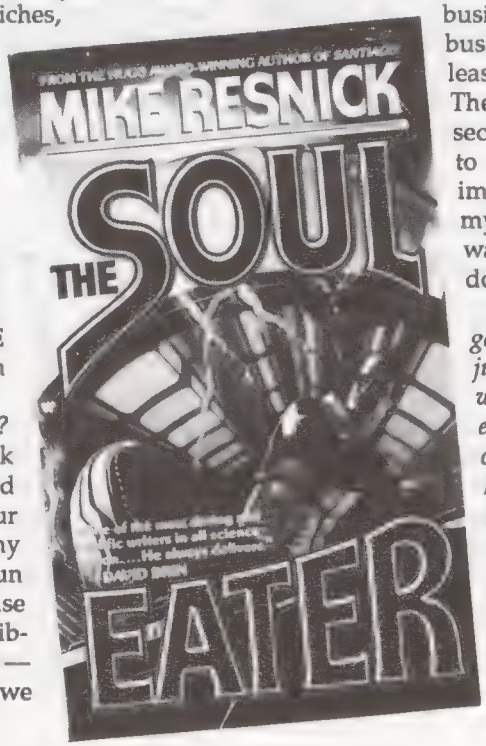


What was your background before you started writing?

I have no background before I started writing. I was writing and selling in high school. I wrote my way through college. I did well over two hundred books, most of them in the sex field under pseudonyms, some of them romance, some of them gothic, before I got around to science fiction. I wrote three science fiction books in the late 60s. They were just three-day grind-it-out jobs. Then I decided not to come back to science fiction until I had the time to do it right. Those books have come back to haunt me at every autograph session I've ever held, but you can view my last ten years' output as penance for them.

I recall seeing GODDESS OF GANYMEDE around a lot. I haven't read it —

Good. I commend you. No, actually, the Ganymede books were not bad for Edgar Rice Burroughs pastiches, which is all they were — an eighteen-year-old kid trying to write like Burroughs — but they're not what *I* do, and I find them singularly embarrassing when they turn up.



So where does your career properly start?

There were two careers. There was one to get me filthy rich, and it did. That ended in the mid-70s. Then there was one where I was just trying to write the very best I could, and that starts about 1981, probably with **THE SOUL EATER** and **BIRTHRIGHT**, which Signet brought out.

What made you turn the corner at that point?

What happened was that somewhere back around 1975 I turned to Carol, my wife, and told her that if I had to do one more eight-hour screenplay or seventy-two-hour novel, my brain was going to turn to porridge and run out my ears. So I had to go find something else to do. At the time we were breeding and exhibiting show collies with considerable success — no economic success; it was a hobby — but we thought that, well, if two of us could care for twenty or twenty-five dogs a day and still have time left over to make a living, think of what a staff of twenty could do. So we went looking all over the country. We bought the second-biggest luxury boarding and grooming kennel in America, which was in Cincinnati, which is why I live there; and it took us about four years to turn the business around. If it had been doing a good business, nobody would have sold it, or at least we wouldn't have been able to afford it. Then, by 1980, we were essentially financially secure for the rest of our lives, and I sat down to write precisely what I wanted. You can imagine my surprise to find that these days my writing out-earns the kennel. I thought I was going to be buried in absolute obscurity doing the kind of stuff that appealed to me.

The difference might be that you're making genuine use of an authentic, exotic setting. You're just about the only person in the field today writing about Africa, from first-hand experience, too. One gets the impression from much contemporary sf that the universe consists of New Jersey. It's what George Scithers calls the Kent County Delaware Syndrome.

New Jersey with lords and ladies.

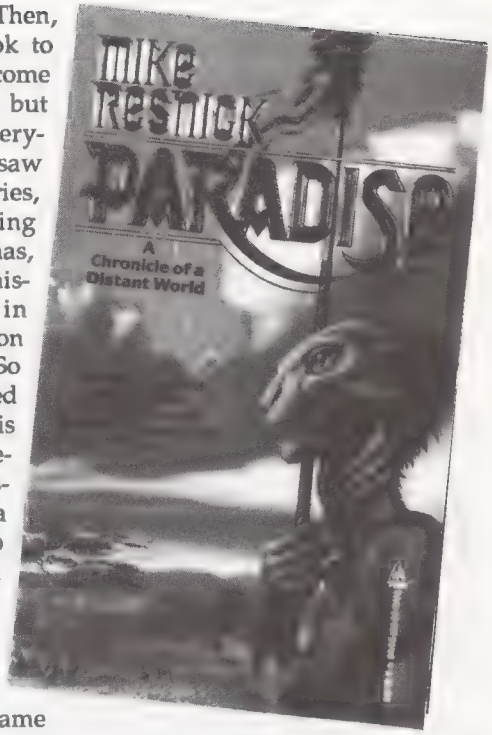
Let's talk about the influence of Africa on your work.

Basically I think that all writers of science fiction, regardless of their politics or backgrounds, share two assumptions.

One is that if we can reach the stars, we're going to colonize them. The second is that if we colonize enough of them, sooner or later we're going to come into conflict with another culture. If you would like to see the effects of colonization on both the colonizers and the colonized and see the effects of cultural clashes, Africa offers fifty-one absolutely brilliant and totally distinct examples. Every country in Africa at one time or another was colonized. I've always been fascinated by it. I've found that in all the safaris we've taken there, I've gotten exactly one short story out of all the game parks I spent time in. It's the people and the cultures that seem to form the basis of all my stories. Because these stories are about relatively recognizable cultures, which are nevertheless incredibly alien to us, they seem to have struck a responsive chord.

How do you then turn it into science fiction? When Ernest Hemingway went to Africa, this hardly inspired him *to write sf or fantasy.*

Actually, most of these stories could be mainstream. Some of the critics, Tom Easton and a couple others, have suggested that I'm just doing mainstream stories in disguise. I have no strenuous objection to mainstream. It's just that I make much more money writing science fiction. The Kirinyaga stories which seem to be getting all these awards came about because Orson Scott Card was doing an anthology called **EUTOPIA** and he had set it up in such a way that it appealed to me. So I agreed to write a story. The premise was essentially a number of terraformed planetoids in orbit around the Earth, each of which gave out a charter to someone who leased or bought it, with the express purpose of setting up a utopian society upon it. I know that originally he was farming out whatever kind of utopia you wanted to write. I think Alan Dean Foster wanted to do a Marxist one. Somebody else wanted to do one with intelligent whales, or whatever. I opted for East Africa, and because I had been there so often and I realized what the Kikuyu think of as utopia, which is something they had until the Europeans — and by "Europeans", they include all whites — came along, I thought it would be interesting to see what would happen if they tried to re-establish such a thing. Scott had two catch-22s that I liked very much. One was that it had to be told by an insider, somebody who lived in the society, worked for it, and believed in it. It couldn't just be **A MARTIAN ODYSSEY**. The other, which was even more meaningful to writing a good story, was that anybody who wanted to leave could. This meant there would be no Winston Smiths trying to overthrow Big Brother.



Based on that, I wrote "Kirinyaga", about a witch doctor who was trying to preserve his society against the encroachments of Western culture — not the technology, but Western *culture.* I chose the most far-fetched example that I could find, which was that in that society they believe that any baby born feet-first must perforce be a demon and be put to death. If you're creating a society that you think is a utopia and you're nonetheless under observation by some other people who think that what you've done is murder, just how strongly must you fight for what you believe? If you give in on this, do you ultimately wind up giving in on everything? Then, the next trip I took to Africa — I usually come back with nothing but novel ideas — everywhere I looked I saw more Kirinyaga stories, so I've been writing them. Kenya itself has, to me, a fascinating history, especially in terms of colonization and the colonized. So I wrote a book called **PARADISE**, which is nothing but an allegory of Kenya's history from perhaps a hundred years ago to fifty years from now. Every animal, person, building, city, whatever, in the book has a Kenyan analog. I came up with a four-page cheat-sheet that I gave out to some readers so they would know what actual history they were reading about when they read the book.

Why not *then write directly about Kenya?*

Let me answer by telling you why I didn't do it directly about **IVORY**, which was the book prior to that. I had read about the tusks of an animal called the Kilimanjaro Elephant, the greatest trophy ever taken. In most of Roland Ward's books of records — he's the fellow who codifies the game records — the difference between first place and twentieth place is quarter of an inch, half a pound, however they measure it. These tusks were twenty-percent larger than any other elephant. So it was apparent that he was a monster even among his own monstrous kind. In every other case, bar none, everything else about the animal was duly noted, his height, his weight, the date of his death, what kind of bullet killed him, where he was shot, who shot him, who was the guide. About the Kilimanjaro Elephant they know nothing. They think, but they do not know, that he was killed on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. They think, but don't know, that he was killed by an escaped slave. They think, but don't know, that he was killed in 1898. About the only thing they *do* know about this awesome creature is that his tusks turned up for auction in Zanzibar. One was bought by an American who was supposed to pick it up in Cairo. It was sent north on a slave caravan which was ambushed by other slave-raiders. The tusk disappeared for years, and finally turned up in Brussels. The other tusk also traveled all over the world. And the more I read about it, the more I thought there was a hell of a mainstream story here. Follow the elephant for the last month of his life, then follow the tusks and every life they touched until they wound up in the British Museum in the 1930s. So I called Eleanor Wood, my agent, in the small hours of the morning, woke her up, babbled on for two hours about how this would make a fabulous mainstream book, and waited for her opinion — which was that if I put in a lot of sex maybe we could sell it

> There were two careers— one to get me filthy rich, and it did, and then there was one where I was just trying to write the very best I could.

for two thousand dollars, whereas if I would remember who my audience was and what I was supposed to be writing, if I would follow the tusks for eight or ten thousand years instead of thirty-four, if I would follow them into space instead of merely to Brussels, she could get me forty times that much. So I got to thinking about it. It occurred to me, of course, that with all time and space to play with, you can certainly draw better moral parables anyhow. So **IVORY** became science fiction. For the same reason, so did **PARADISE** and so did every other book I've written. I imagine that of the thirty books I have out, twenty-five would translate very comfortably into mainstream.

Are you satisfied with all this? Or do you feel that you had to put on a mask for some of these books?

There are two ways of looking at it. On days I'm not thinking clearly I'm a little dissatisfied. I think it's a gilded cage, but a cage nonetheless. On other days I realize the things you can do with science fiction. As I say, with all time and all space, you can build your parables much better. For example, with the history of Kenya, were I to do a straight novel, I would have to present the history pretty much as it occurred. With **PARADISE** I get to pick and chose the events that *I* thought were meaningful, and I don't have to defend them because I'm not writing a history. I'm writing a work of fiction with the author's preconceptions and prejudices and conclusions embedded in it. It seems to me that the biggest problem I have right at the moment is actually selling a single mystery book as opposed to a series of them. Again, this gilded-cage syndrome. I wrote a mystery novel about seven or eight years ago. I had a couple of offers that I found just too low, so I refused them. And about a year ago I had a spare moment, so I stuck it in the computer and updated it and sent it out. I have had three offers for it from three different publishers, but nobody will offer me a one-book contract. They won't begin to pay anything like what my science fiction pays. Since it's already written, I would be willing to let this book go, essentially, for peanuts, but I won't sign a two or three book contract where I have to write a *new* one for peanuts. So for that reason I have a feeling that this book will sit on the shelf unsold forever. To that extent, science fiction is a little bit of a bind. But in terms of restricting what I want to say, it actually broadens the implications of what I say and the range of what I can write about.

Have you ever wanted to write an African fantasy, *and do for African lore what Poul Anderson in* ***THE BROKEN SWORD*** *did for Norse myth?*

I really haven't. I am doing a story for Jane Yolen's **XANADU** now that will essentially deal with African mythology and be a fantasy, but it's a short story. The only fantasy novel that I've written (unless you assume that anything that encompasses faster-than-light speed is a fantasy, in which case all my books are) was **STALKING THE UNICORN**, which put layers and layers of charm and jokes over an incredibly grim worldview, a worldview that I think a number of the critics may have missed. It was fun to write. I've gone back and done more stories and novelettes with those characters. But, while I have no prejudice as a writer or a reader against fantasy, as a writer I tend to think in science-fictional terms.

Do you think it's innate that one's imagination works in fantasy or in science fiction, or in both, but that they are different *talents?*

Yes, I do. I agree totally. I know a lot of people seem to feel that it's sex-linked — women write fantasy; men write science fiction — but I think that's a load of crap. I don't know any man who is writing tougher, harder-nosed science fiction than Pat Cadigan and I don't know any women who can write any lovelier fantasies than Thomas Burnett Swann. If it is predetermined at some point along the road to maturity which you're going to favor, I don't know what factors lead you to favor one over the other.

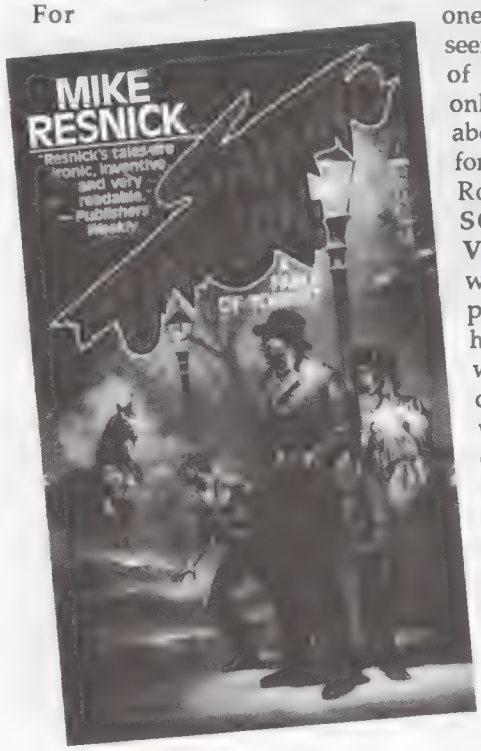
At what point along in your development was this determined? Now, when you were writing like Burroughs at age eighteen — essentially in a fantasy mode, with a science-fictional gloss — was this your "natural inclination", if we might call it that, merely to make money, or as a method of getting into print?

I think it was probably to get into print. I always wanted to write science fiction, but of course as people mature their notion of science fiction changes. At eighteen I thought Edgar Rice Burroughs wrote science fiction about as well as anybody. By twenty-four I certainly had outgrown that, and I thought Isaac Asimov had the key, which was to write good, hard-technological stories with a nice twist at the end. By the time I was thirty I had outgrown that and I understood that Robert Sheckley knew exactly what science fiction was, which was biting social satire. Then I got a little older and I thought Barry Malzberg had the key to bringing the literary novel to science fiction. Then one day I looked around and I was pretty much selling what *I* wanted to sell, and it's not like any of them. So I go back to a statement I know Harlan Ellison is fond of quoting: I agree with William Faulkner. The purpose of *any* fiction is examine the human heart in conflict with itself. To the extent that the scientific content interferes with that in a science-fiction story, I think that story fails as literature, whether or not it succeeds as science fiction.

I am sure that someday there will be writers saying, "Well, Mike Resnick had the key to it..."

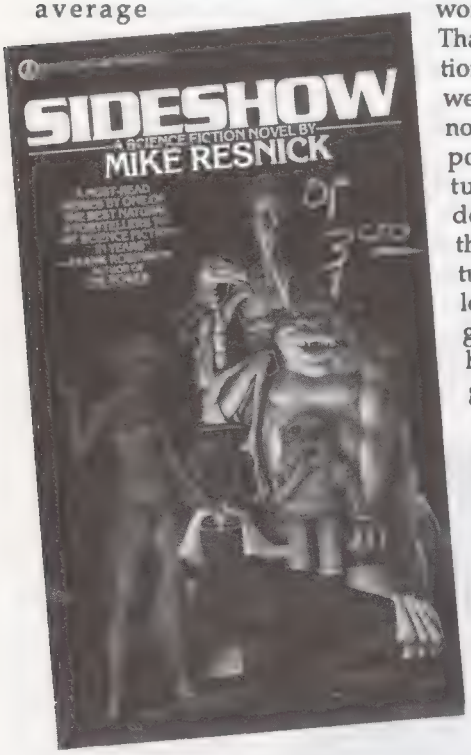
I hope I can confuse them as much as all these predecessors confused me. I don't think anybody has got the key to it. That's one of the nice things about this field, and that's probably why we publish more than one book a year.

To return to the subject of Africa, what are some of the common misconceptions about it that you encounter in other fiction? I don't necessarily mean fiction as far back as Burroughs or H. Rider Haggard either, but modern fiction. So, what are we not seeing?



For one thing, you are never seeing the African side of the question. The only best-selling books about Africa in the last forty or fifty years were Robert Ruark's **SOMETHING OF VALUE** and **UHURU**, which were both very powerful. But since he lived entirely with white colonists and only went out with white hunters, he only heard their side of the question. Hemingway's African writings, his non-fiction especially, I found a little bit ludicrous. The man would be waiting in the middle of no-

where in a kudu-blind for seventy-three hours for this animal to show up, and seven guys would pass by to discuss literature with him. This may have made good reading, but it was rather silly. Problems with sub-Saharan Africa are that you have a large part of an entire continent with its leaders, not to say it in a negative way, but simply to be perfectly blunt, one and two generations out of the bush. Nobody prepared them for self-government or running a bureaucracy. You have tribalism as the prime, motivating force among twenty-three hundred tribes who share only forty-four sub-Saharan countries. All the borderlines were artificially drawn in England in 1885 when the Europeans powers divided this place. They're absolutely meaningless except that they've led to an enormous amount of genocide. I would say that they probably should have created either twenty-three hundred countries, or one. You have a situation where tribal culture is in serious, serious conflict with a thin leavening of European culture. Graft runs rampant because they learned it from the Europeans. The ecology is totally out of balance because they have degraded the land. It could be argued that penicillin tripled the population in thirty or forty years. You have a culture where, for example in Kenya the average woman has eight children. That's because a generation ago, seven of them were expected to die. Now none of them die and the population has quintupled since independence, which was less than a quarter of a century ago. You have problems there which are not going to be solved. You have a continent that's going straight to Hell in a handbasket. It was given a good push in that direction by the various colonizing powers. Someday it'll come back, but not soon. In any case, it's fascinating to analyze, because if we ever are to reach the stars and to practice colonization again, we ought to learn something from Africa.



How about writing a story about Earth the colonized?

I suppose eventually I will. The problem with writing about Earth being colonized, and it's only been done about eight million times, is that in all but maybe three of those stories one lone man, not unlike Errol Flynn, leads a revolt that overthrows the bad guys. No African revolts were successful, possibly excepting the war in Zimbabwe which had all kinds of help from the outside. The Mau-Mau was one of the all-time great guerrilla wars that failed. They were put down. Kenya got independence seven years later because it was economically advantageous for Britain to divest itself of its colonies, which were costing it an arm and a leg. So what you have here is a number of colonies which never did overthrow the yoke of tyranny, but for various reasons, usually economic, gained their independence. They gained it at different times in different circumstances. And what they did with it is also interesting. In Portuguese East Africa, they threw all the whites out, all the technocrats, the bureaucracy, and they descended into total barbarism in less than a year. Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe took a good hard look at that and decided not to make the same mistake, and fifteen years after independence, he's about to get thrown out by the blacks because he refuses to throw the whites out and subdivide their land. Julius Nyerere is perhaps one of the great Socialist philosophers of this century, but he had a horrible country, Tanzania, to practice with. Nothing grows there and nothing valuable exists under the ground, and he managed to bankrupt it. But, although all these countries are in dire straits, none of them are in dire straits through the same methodology or the same politics.

> Hemingway's...African...man would be waiting in the middle of nowhere, and seven guys would pass by to discuss literature with him.

Are the Africans optimistic about their own future?

Not very. A few of them are. Most of them, if you can get them to speak off the record, will admit that things were better under the British and the French. I find this shameful, and the colonizers have to share part of the blame. They never prepared these nations for self-government. Now, you would think that self-government isn't all that difficult. America did it. But America had the cream of the crop from Virginia, from all the colonies, educated men who had been considering and pondering this problem for many, many decades, and came together to produce a document, the Declaration of Independence, and another document, the Constitution, which we've been living under for two hundred years. What you have in Africa are people who were, in some cases literally, wearing loin-cloths three years before they were being sworn in as presidents in their tuxedos. In the mid-1970s, a survey of the presidents of the sub-Saharan countries would have shown you that five of them had practiced cannibalism. I'm not commenting on their dietary habits; I'm simply saying that this is perhaps not the best preparation to run a modern, westernized country.

This would seem to preclude the possibility of Africans writing science fiction. Their speculations would presumably be very different from our own. But is there any African sf?

There is no science fiction, to my knowledge, in any African culture or being published anywhere in Africa. They're so concerned with the immediate problems that they're not really very interested in literatures of warning about the future. Science fiction is inherently dystopian. It is a literature of warning. None of us can possibly have more than one utopia in us, by definition. Everything else, to some degree or another has to be dystopian. Africans are living in such an immediate dystopia that they are very unconcerned with what may go wrong a hundred and seventy-three years from now.

Have you had much opportunity to mix with the people there and get their views?

Absolutely. We've taken five trips there in the last six years and we have three more on tap. Yes, we certainly go to game

parks, and we stay in very nice lodges in part of the trips, but for at least half of each trip we get out among the people. We talk. I usually have a guide that they know who can translate for me. This is where I do my research. This is where I get my stories. I know that *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, which I think exists solely to keep me from getting a swelled head, seems to feel that these characters I've drawn are unrealistic, that they can't possibly exist in the real world. All I can do is tell you is that I did not have to invent my witch-doctor who does not like Europeans. There are about eight hundred thousand of him in Kenya and about two million of him in Zimbabwe and lots more of him everywhere else on that continent.

I suppose if the critic were honest, he'd have to wonder how he could possibly know, since you've been there and the critic hasn't.

I agree wholeheartedly and I have no answer to that, but obviously somebody must have different ideas.

Have you ever had any feedback on these stories from African readers?

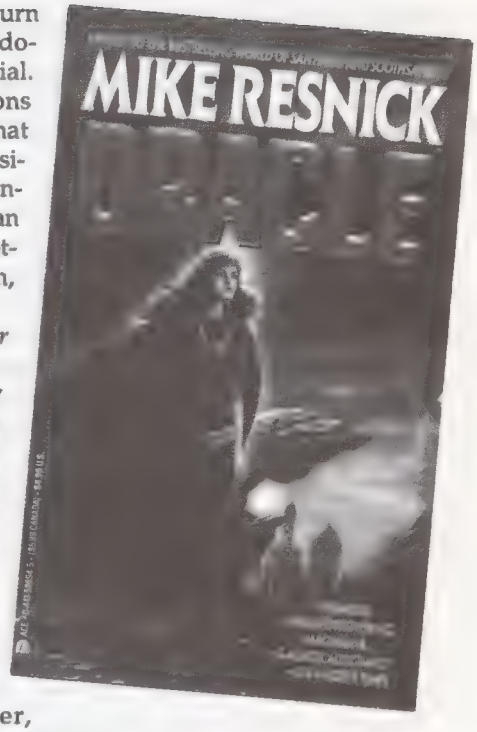
Yes, I have. My books and stories do get imported, especially to Kenya and Zimbabwe, and they sell very, very well there. I have had letters from various members of the government (all of them Kikuyu, I might add), about the Kirinyaga stories. Most of the Masai still do not read or write, so I've heard very little from them about **IVORY**, but I know my books are there. One of the things I do is, whenever a book of mine comes out, I send all my freebies to the East African Wildlife Society as a donation to their gift shop. They keep the money they make from selling them. So I know the books get dispersed there as well as through my British editions, which get shipped down there automatically. And I have heard from perhaps sixty to seventy black Africans and about twenty white Africans, which is a hell of a lot of fan letters, considering the postage and just the difficulty of getting a letter off that continent.

Do these readers feel that you're depicting their culture accurately?

I've never had a black African feel that I was either a racist or that I had done them any disservice in the way I have depicted them. Many of them, to be totally honest, don't understand all the intricacies of science fiction because they're totally unacquainted with it. But they understand what the stories are about and they tend to agree with them. When the Kirinyaga stories come out in book form, there is a fellow from the Ministry of Culture, a Kikuyu, who has agreed to write the introduction and essentially say that I understand his particular tribe, the Kikuyu, better than any white, including Ruark, which I find very flattering.

I suppose this will be the Great Subject for a good deal of your career. Having so acquainted yourself with Africa, you couldn't suddenly turn to eastern Asia, could you?

Well, I suppose that one of these days we will want to visit East Asia, and for the IRS to look upon such a trip with some compassion I'll come up with something to write about it, but I've been fascinated with Africa all my life. I should point out, though, that this is not the only stuff that I'm writing. I've been doing a series of alternate history stories about Theodore Roosevelt, whom I consider to be our most accomplished and fascinating and complex American. That surprised me, because I grew up thinking of him as a rather simplistic jingoist, like everybody else, until I learned more about him. I've also created, in the future where I've set most of my stories, including the African ones, an area known as the Inner Frontier filled with bigger-than-life characters such as wandered around in **SANTIAGO** and a couple of other books. And I have a trilogy coming out from Ace now called **SOOTHSAYER**, **ORACLE**, and **PROPHET** that return to that area. So I'm not doing *only* African material. It's just that for reasons that elude me, except that they're striking a sensitive, painful, and responsive chord, the African stories seem to be getting the critical attention, and all the awards.



Could you describe your writing methods?

Well, they probably only work unless you steal my wife, because she is my line-editor and uncredited collaborator, and we will sit around and discuss various stories and aspects of them. She has mastered a technique that must be very difficult for her, which is to come up with stories, characters, and notions that play to *my* strengths, rather than coming up with the ones that she would write if *she* were sitting at the keyboard. When I know everything I need to know about a story, where it's going and who's in it, then I'll sit down and start writing it - I don't believe in letting stories write themselves — I think the term they're using these days is *grow organically* — which means staring at a blank sheet of paper or a computer screen waiting for inspiration. When I sit down I know what I'm going to say, if not exactly how I'm going to say it. I will write, usually, from about ten at night to four in the morning, when nobody is there to disturb me. Then Carol, my wife, gets up ahead of me, and I will leave the evening's pages on the breakfast table for her. When I get up, she will have made notes, occasionally so copious that there are more words in the notes than are in my pages. I will then go back and incorporate her corrections and keep doing it until I get it right. Usually it takes two or three shots, after which I go do the next story or the next chapter. I tend not to write an entire draft of a book and go back and rewrite. I tend to wait until each chapter is set in stone. Just a personal preference, no reason for that. What else can I tell you about it? I have never followed her advice and gotten a story okayed by her that failed to sell the first time out of the box. Sometimes I don't follow her advice. Eventually they sell, frequently not on the first submission. I know that I use a computer with a word-processing program that's been obsolete for about eight years, but it's the one I learned on and I'm very comfortable with it. I am sure there must be five or six hundred better ones out there.

Do you outline everything, or is it a matter of getting the emotional steam up and plunging into the story?

I outline, not in the terms of a formal outline that you'd show an editor, because usually I can sell a book just on a phone call or a lunch conversation these days. But I will do a bit of an outline for myself, showing where a chapter will start and finish. One thing that I don't do when I'm writing is read fiction. It's not that I will swipe anybody's ideas or anybody's characters, but I will inadvertently borrow their voices. If I do read

some fiction before I sit down to write, Carol can tell me the next morning who I read, because that's who I'll sound like for two or three pages before I get my own voice back.

> I've never had a black African feel that I was either a racist or that I had done them any disservice in the way I have depicted them.

Have you ever had the desire to assume an influence deliberately? For example, you might disagree with the way some other writer handled the material and want to go back and fix it, or you might want to counter a tendency in your own work. For example, if you find your prose getting too florid, you go and read some Hemingway for a while.

No in terms of style, yes in terms of ideas. As for style, you have to remember, I had written twelve to fourteen million words and been paid for them before I started writing science fiction I was willing to sign my name to; so I had pretty well discovered my own literary voice and methodology. In terms of ideas, yes, I think half the ideas I get are because somebody else had what I thought was a very nice notion and either told it wrong or told the wrong story. An example would be the Carnival series I did a few years ago for Signet. The first book was **SIDESHOW**. I'd seen **THE ELEPHANT MAN**, both the play and the movie, and it occurred to me that the most interesting guy in it was not Sir Frederick Treves, who — I would like to think we would all behave like that — found out what the elephant man was, who discovered the sensitive and artistic soul within that hideously deformed body and gave him some sort of sanctuary in the hospital where he could die in peace. To me the interesting guy was the carnival owner who knew precisely what this man was, and treated him like an animal for ten years anyway. And, as I read more about Merrick, the Elephant Man, because both the play and the movie interested me, I found something very fascinating, that dramatically wouldn't work, so it was never referred to in the movie or the play. That was that the carny owner came to the hospital about two years after Merrick had arrived, totally destitute, and begged him to come out on the road while he got a grubstake, to go out as a freak again. Treves and all the other members of the hospital staff said, "We will protect you. You don't have to do this. We'll throw this bum out." But Merrick was willing to go out, and did go out, in Europe, for three or four months, and then returned to the hospital to die. And I began to think, what kind of a person could treat you like that for ten years, and you would still be willing to do this favor for him? That's when I realized that both the movie and the play had told the wrong story. I wanted to tell one, so I wrote **SIDESHOW**. It became very popular, went through a number of printings, and it was based on the story **THE ELEPHANT MAN** missed. And others of my books and stories are based on things that I think were either told wrong or were simply ignored in the telling. I think a lot of us must do it that way. How many plots can there be?

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What are you working on now or do you expect to be working on in the immediate future?

Well, getting back to Africa, having done **PARADISE**, which I think is the best book I did — I very much enjoyed it — which was, as I said, an allegory of Kenya's history in science-fictional terms, I've just signed to do **PURGATORY**, which will do the same for Zimbabwe. There were five or six books between them, so I'll wait five or six more books and then do **INFERNO** about Uganda, just so nobody thinks these are a trilogy. They're not related. I've also signed to do a sequel to **ADVENTURES** for Warner Books. And I've committed to write more Teddy Roosevelt and more Kirinyaga stories. At the moment you're catching me pretty much between contracts. I've just handed in the trilogy to Ace. Tor is doing a collection of mine. In fact, I think I have sixteen books coming out in the next twenty-three months. Lest that seem shocking, I should tell you that a number of them are anthologies that I've edited, and there are a couple of reprints, and a couple collections of my stories, and I think five or six new novels. And this summer I started doing some screenwriting, finally. Hollywood had called a number of times, and I finally said, "What the hell, I'll give it a try." So I am doing a draft of a script for ***SANTIAGO***, based on my own book, that Gary Kurtz is producing. I am also doing a rewrite of a rejected script of Osa Johnson's memoirs, **I MARRIED ADVENTURE**, which is about fifty years old. They've both been very educational. I have no intention of ever becoming a full-time screenwriter, but I'm not committing myself too far ahead with books, so I'll at least have enough time to learn about this and see if I enjoy it.

The one other book I have on tap, which isn't sold to anyone yet, although we've talked to some editors about it, isn't going to be science fiction or fantasy. What happened was that we were walking out of *INDIANA JONES AND THE LAST CRUSADE* — now we enjoy these as much as the next person; they're good summer fun — but Carol turned to me and said, "Don't they do anything that isn't supernatural?" She was so tired of the Holy Grail and the Lost Ark, and I said, "Well, like what?" She thought and said, "King Solomon's Mines." I said, "There have been three or four movies on King Solomon's Mines. The Granger was good, the others stunk, but it's been done." And she said, "Yeah, but you know and I know that the mines were nowhere near where they said and that isn't the way you'd go about it," and by the time we'd reached the car in the parking lot, I had a book all plotted out, called **OPHIR**. I don't believe in King Solomon's Mines, but if they exist I know where they logically should be, and I've done so much studying and reading on Africa, and most of the books are not that new, that I would love to do an historical adventure, kind of an Indiana Jones for grownups, set about 1920 or so, and the McGuffin is the secret of where Ophir and where the mines are. It'll be a lot more logical than Haggard. I'm dying to write that book. And, that one, *nobody* is going to talk me into science-fictionalizing. That's about a year and a half up the road, maybe longer.

Thanks, Mike.

❧

Artwork by Larry Dixon

The Ties That Bind

Marinya pressed her forehead to the smooth, cool surface of the stone wall. She swallowed hard, forcing down the nauseated tears that welled up in her. She did not cry. She had been taught better than that.

She drew her knees up to her chest as she huddled in one corner of the tiny storage room. Few of the mages came this far down

by Michelle Benoit

dungeons anymore. There were acolytes to do that, and she was the only one who knew this particular passageway, one of a myriad in the labyrinthine underground. No, the mages would not find her here. That was what she kept telling herself as she gulped down the lump of fear that had taken up residence in her throat.

Her eyes closed, and she rocked herself gently back and forth. Never in her life had she been so miserable. The day the mages had ridden into town had seemed a day like any other. The children were both awed and frightened by them. She joined her friends in alternately spying and running away in terror. It had all been so much fun. The mages would leave the following day, and the murmurs would fade until a new bit of news sparked the town.

This time, however, they would not leave as they had come. Another unwilling traveler would join them.

Marinya, like all the chattering children of the town, had been herded into a small building that served as the meeting hall. The somber, robe-enshrouded mages stood before them, terrible and stern with eyes like dead stones. Marinya had shuddered when she first saw them. She had learned to trust her instincts, being smaller and weaker than most of the children her age, and her instinct now told her something was wrong. Something about the mages upset her unreasonably, made her want to bolt into the woods and never come out. Her own mother pushed her into the cold hands of the mages that day.

As her turn came up, the last of the town children, she looked into the lifeless eyes of the mages. She shuddered and looked away, wishing to be even smaller than she was. The High Mage would not be put off by her squeamishness, however. He reached out a bony hand and drew Marinya forward. She flinched at the touch and would have fled had it not been for the warm touch of her mother behind her. Stumbling forth and shivering violently, she waited for the mage to do his worst.

His cold eyes watched her. "Choose the Poet," the sepulchral voice commanded.

For the first time her eyes focused on the cards ranged in front of her. Their intricate designs were uniformly similar, telling her careful eyes nothing. Her brows drew together for a good show. She chose, and the mage drew the card.

"Death," he announced. "Choose." Relief shone on her face. A shaky hand went out to snatch another card. She almost crowed when the Ring-bearer smiled back at her.

The mage merely nodded. "Choose," came the inexorable voice again.

Marinya swallowed. She was not yet finished, it seemed. Her sweaty hand touched another of the glossy cards.

"The Tree of Life," the mage finished. Marinya smiled in relief and started to walk away. The dreaded touch fell upon her again.

"Hold," the voice rasped. Marinya was held firm by her mother's grasp. She squirmed, wishing for nothing better than to flee the sight of the awful man.

The skeletal hand of the mage turned over the first card. The Poet, on the first try. His hand paused and then continued. Card after card, the Poet sat taciturn with his harp and reed.

Marinya's face first blanched and then reddened with tears as she realized what she had done. Out of nine-and-forty cards, she had chosen the only three that were not the Poet.

"Who does this child belong to?" the mage asked sternly. Her mother stepped up, proud of her daughter but nervous nonetheless. "The lass is mine."

"You will be given ten goldens for her. She will come to the Mages' Tower to study." The place needed no better name than that.

Her mother beamed in wonder. Ten goldens would make her family rich in the small town. The woman clapped her hands together, crushing Marinya to her. "Of course, Lord Mage! She will be ready within the hour."

The proceeding hour was a blur of congratulations and celebration in her family. Her many brothers and sisters cheered for her, knowing that with her gone, their share of the family's meager portion would be that much greater. In truth, they thought this the best for her as well. Dazed, Marinya could only reflect that her life had come to an end.

Not so, she soon realized. Taken from home and family, she was led to a high tower that not even sunshine could breach, and was locked away. They had not even asked her name.

A month now she had been trapped within the Tower, forced to learn strange runes and perform arcane rituals she could not even guess at. Her soul yearned for the freedom of what the mages would call an ordinary life. Life was what she wanted, full and vigorous. How was it that she was the only one that saw this thing as a horror and not an honor? She had no desire to be a mage, to become one of the lifeless ones that spent their days in darkened studies reading useless tomes. No one had asked her. She had said nothing.

A long, low tolling resounded through the high tower, echoing even in the lowest reaches of the forgotten dungeon. Marinya started and squeezed her eyes shut. How she dreaded the morning bell! It meant that another long, grueling day of mental torture was to begin all over again.

Stealing a further second, Marinya threw off the melancholy and did what she had to. She unfolded her small body from the floor, winding her hands around her stomach to stop the churning. She had tried to starve herself to death, but no one had noticed. Too many students skipped meals in the fervor of magic. She had given in finally, despairing. She was too full of life, even in this dead place. She would live, even here.

She brushed the wrinkles out of her white shift. They would hardly be noticed, but her mother had raised her right. She lifted her proud head, stifling the shaming tears that seemed always on the brink of spilling.

It was to be the library today. The work was dull drudgery, but at least she would not meet the gut-wrenching terror of facing her teacher mages. She took her place among the other students. No one marked her presence.

Marinya stole a glance around at the others. Most were older than she, quiet and studious in their devotions. She could see the beginnings of the deadness in them, the deadness of her teachers and keepers.

She scraped her chair along the cobbled floor and searched out the book she was supposed to be studying. The Tower had a king's fortune in books. Huge tomes, bound in leather and gold and precious jewels, lined the walls. Even the small, ordinary brown book she carried to her table was worth more than her entire town.

She carefully opened the book and turned the yellowed pages. Her father had taught her well the care of such treasures. They had owned a worn little reader some noble had cast off, now the sole treasure of the family. She had learned her letters and numbers from the book, as had all of the children in her large family. Never had she guessed that learning would ever be put to use in such a way.

Artwork by Larry Dixon

Her eyes blurred as the tears came up again. She forced them down. She would only stain the book if she cried and get a thrashing for it. Her eyes focused again. She would do as they said; she had little choice.

She read the line over again. The spell of escapement, it said. She looked at the title on the spine, all but obscured with age. Fear sparked her nerves as she realized she had taken the wrong book, a book meant only for initiates. She was but an acolyte, the lowest of the students.

She started to get up to surreptitiously return the book, but a thought struck her. She looked at the spell again: the spell of escapement. If they caught her reading it, she would be whipped, perhaps worse. She was not sure that she would even be able to use the spell. She was only an acolyte...but they had said she had strong magic. Perhaps that could make up for lack of experience.

Taking out her stylus and parchment, Marinya began to copy down the spell, her eyes flickering to those around her. She need not have worried; they ignored her completely.

In the days that followed, her teachers noted, with certain interest, that Marinya's studies improved by leaps and bounds. She had a sudden interest in learning proper pronunciations, studying them meticulously until she had them right. Her face, bright and shiny in a sea of somber visages, disconcerted the grim old mages as she tried out the gestures they described. Her rituals went well, but she seemed to waste an inordinate amount of spell components in the making. They put it down to her country upbringing and grunted in approval to her.

The High Mage watched her progress, seeing the intensity she at last applied to her studies. He mumbled small encouragements to her as she faded into the class of other diligent students. He soon had other things to occupy his attention, students to instruct and research of his own to conduct. The girl was forgotten once more.

The lock to the acolytes' laboratory clicked home as Marinya ducked inside. It was not until near morning before the more ardent students finally gave up and went to bed. She would have to hurry before anyone came to get an early start for the following day.

She had practiced the words and gestures to the spell so well she could say them in her sleep. The spell components came tumbling out of her pockets as she hurriedly lit the brazier. She had studied the herbs carefully, noting their attributes in her little notebook. She had somehow snitched a paring of dragon horn and the heart of a black pearl from one of the older students. By the time he found out, she hoped to be long gone.

Setting a warding spell, she prepared for the ritual. She stripped her clothes from her small form and set the herbs afire. Marinya breathed deeply and began the chant of quickening. Soon her fingers joined in the chant, weaving a complex set of fire lines that hung in the air around her. The dragon horn went into the brazier and threw up a cloud of pungent blue smoke. Power poured from her and into the spell, burning her with the drain of it. She could feel the magic slowly seeping back into her with the force of enchantment.

A fist pounded on the door. A voice the texture of dry parchment called out, "Open this door."

Her concentration flickered only slightly as she continued to weave the spell. It would not do to rush the creating. She only hoped time would be enough.

She felt the brush of knowing but ignored it. "Marinya!" came the surprised voice of the High Mage. "What are you doing? Open this door!"

She sensed him ordering other mages around outside the door. Soon. Soon.

Her hands fell to her sides as the spell neared completion. She drew the black heart of the pearl from her pouch and lifted it before her eyes. It glowed with a dark fire. Holding it between finger and thumb, she brought it to her lips. She swallowed the heart, and the spell was whole.

With one part of her mind, she could hear the mages milling around confusedly in the corridor that led to the laboratory. The High Mage continued to bang ineffectually on the solid wooden door.

Marinya smiled in the grip of the spell she had woven. She would be home soon. She remembered the smell of her mother baking bread, the noise of her brothers and sisters shouting in play, the feel of the horse's muzzle in her hand. The sky would be clear, large white birds soaring on the gentle thermals above the quiet glen. She would be home again, beyond the reach of the funereal mages. Marinya opened the dormer windows and looked out from the heights of the Tower. She would live again.

The door to the laboratory splintered inward under mage fire as her instructor burst into the room. The High Mage's glare softened into shock as he watched the spell wrap her in its enchantment.

Marinya merely looked at him as the spell took its final form. She stretched her white neck and lifted her ivory wings to the morning. A tentative sun was just splitting the darkness with its amber light. Her pale, glistening feathers ruffled in the welcome breeze as she pushed off from the window sill and headed towards that brave sun. The wind under her wings and the horizon her only boundary, she slipped free of the earth and soared toward the heavens. She was free, free to live again.

The mages bunched in the doorway of the laboratory behind the High Mage. He watched her in astonishment, his pale face drained of life. "Marinya," he whispered to himself, "you need but have asked..."

❧

MICHELLE BENOIT has recently graduated from college, Summa cum laude in English, French, and history. She hopes to work as an editor or writer in the fantasy or science fiction field. She lives in Louisiana.

LARRY DIXON is married to Mercedes Lackey and was recommended to us as an artist who was an expert at drawing birds.

The Friends of Darkover wish it to be known that the Darkover Newsletter, a quarterly, is available for the sum of $7.00 annually in the U.S., $10.00 per annum in Canada, or $17.00 foreign. Payment must be either a check in U.S. funds drawn on a U.S. bank or a postal money order in U.S. dollars, payable to Marion Zimmer Bradley, Ltd.

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The Last Word

First off, we have a correction to print: the *correct* last several paragraphs of our issue 16 cover story. They should have been:

> I gazed up at the waning moon. "A kingdom for a horse?"
> No. I rephrased it.
> A horse for a kingdom.

We apologize to anyone who was confused by our omission of the last, crucial sentence.

On to this issue: Did you notice our stories with classical Greco-Roman themes? Two in this issue: "Pandemonium" and "Turnabout". (There's at least one more to come, "The Great World and the Small" by Darrell Schweitzer, in issue #18.) It's enough to make you dust off your Edith Hamilton mythology book and re-read it! Two genuine American fantasies: "The White Snake" and "Bogeyman". Plus several that defy genre sub-division. And one, "Feedback", which was inspired in part by the author's reading, a long time back, of Robert Silverberg's novel **DYING INSIDE**, though Roger Russell's use of the theme (common enough in fantasy literature) is very modern.

Next month, we have a rousing yarn by Jo Clayton to start us off, called "Arakney's Web" — no, there are no spiders in the story. Nicholas Jainschigg is scheduled to do a cover illustration for it. And the issue after THAT, we have already purchased a beautiful cover by Janny Wurts. We're timing that issue, #19, to coincide with Janny's appearance as Artist Guest of Honor at NorWesCon in Seattle in March, 1993.

But even as we plan our future issues with pleasure, we have great sadness to report: the deaths of two of our contributors.

Fritz Leiber, whom we honored with our cover artwork in issue #15 and who provided us with the delightful tale of his inspiring friendship with H.P. Lovecraft, died at age 81 on Sept. 5, 1992, in San Francisco. Marion and I are both glad that we were able to put that issue together while he lived, not as an obituary.

Millea Kenin, an Oakland writer, artist, and small-press publisher of *Owlflight* and *Othergates*, died August 20 of an aneurism. She was 49. Her story "Arkady Mountain" appeared in ***FANTASY Magazine***'s first issue, and she was a regular contributor to Marion's anthologies. I had always figured that if I couldn't continue working as Managing Editor for some reason, we might ask Millea to take over, so I am stunned to hear of her death.

—Rachel E. Holmen

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❑ **Turnabout** by Nick Pollotta	❑ Richard Sardinha
❑ **The White Snake** by Mara Grey	❑ Laura Freas
❑ **The Riddle Trial** b y Deborah Burros	❑ Barb Armata
❑ **The Unjust Curse** by Patricia B. Cirone	❑ Dameon Willich
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❑ **The Gift of Death** by Glenn DeTurk	❑ Margaret Organ-Kean
❑ **Bogey Man** by Cheryl Edwards Gorman	❑ Alan Giana
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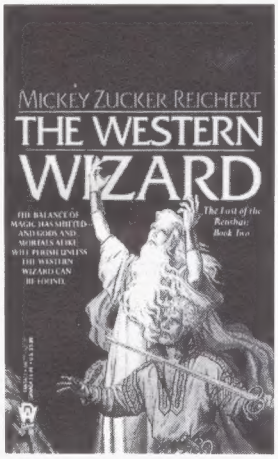

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Mickey Zucker Reichert

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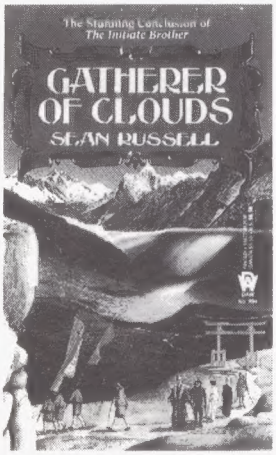

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